

The Fifth Race's Reclaimers

by Piero217

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Summary: Three galaxies, thousands of worlds, four great races watching over them all... and only one species destined to inherit their place. Will the human race be able to attain the Mantle of Responsibility, or will our enemies prevail in destroying us? A massive crossover set shortly after the events of Halo: Infinity (Spartan Ops).

1. Chapter 1: Discoveries

****A/N:** This is my very first time writing a fic. Also, English is ******_not_****** my native language, so I'll appreciate and gladly accept any comments and/or corrections. In fact, feel free to point out even the tiniest little detail you might find, so I can help improve my English and in turn my stories.**

****If** you haven't read the Forerunner Saga or the first two books in the Kilo-Five Trilogy, you might have a hard time understanding some of the things happening in this story, so I strongly recommend reading them first.**

****Disclaimer:** I do not own Halo or Stargate. I'm just a huge fan of both franchises just like you. Enjoy!**

* * *

><p>Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, Earth

****0700 hrs. July 14, 2013****

The sun started to rise over the ocean, its rays shining off the waves and generating a beautiful display of multicolored light. It was the beginning of a new day over planet Earth, and it certainly seemed to be full of hope and new opportunities.

As the yellow star began to rise higher above the sky, the reflection of its light started to shine off something else, something standing mightily tall over the waves. Any seaman sailing through those waters would have believed it to be a wonderful mirage.

But John Sheppard knew better. He was standing on the "mirage", after all. He had spent 5 years living in an alien city in a foreign galaxy, but now Atlantis was back to the planet where it had first been built, and he loved the sight of the familiar star rising over the city.

The Ancient city-ship was uncloaked; it needed not be hidden, not this far into the Pacific Ocean. This was no-man's land, which meant virtually no passing ships near the floating city. It had been moved to this location, further away from the mainland, roughly three months after its arrival on Earth, in order to keep it safe from any prying eyes attentive enough to distinguish the slight shimmer of the cloaked city in the horizon of San Francisco.

It had already been 4 years since thatâ€¦

And many things had changed in that time.

Currently, there was no more real combat in the Milky Way galaxy; the Goa'uld and the Ori had both been defeated, and the Lucian Alliance, though formidable, had become into nothing more than a mere nuisance after their defeat onboard the Destiny. Only a few skirmishes had taken place ever since, and they all had been in space, whereâ€¦thanks in no small part to the Asgard technology received years beforeâ€¦Earth's humans now held considerable superiority.

As for the Wraith, wellâ€¦it sufficed to say they were no longer a real threat for the galaxy. Most of them had met their end in a way so frightening it made even John feel a tingling on his back. Those few that remained were not enough anymore to reclaim Pegasus, posing only a small menace to the galaxy now.

And so, even though the Ancient city had just enough power to go back to Pegasus and finish the job, the IOA had decided it would be wiser to let it remain on Earth where (according to them) it would be more valuable, establishing a whole new base back on the neighboring galaxy instead.

The planet chosen for the new Pegasus Forward Base would be in the very edge of the galaxy, have no Stargate of its ownâ€¦one would be brought in from the old Intergalactic Bridgeâ€¦and it would be completely abandoned and ignored by the remaining Wraith. With both the Daedalus and the Apollo also providing continuous support, the place was simply the perfect beachhead.

Sheppard and his team had been among the military personnel who would travel back to establish the new base, along with a special team of scientists, but when it was confirmed the Wraith were virtually gone, the IOA decided it was no longer necessary to keep such a large force in Pegasus, and most of the original contingent had remained on Earth, including John.

Now, without any mission to carry out, he had more than enough time to spare to just watch the Earth sunrise from one of the balconies of the Ancient city until the reds and oranges shining off the ocean

faded entirely. Even though he was allowed to go back to the States on a regular basis, he had been toldâ€"no, he had been ordered to remain on Atlantis for reasons only the IOA knew.

Sheppard really missed the combat, fighting in the front lines, or at the very least, the off-world travels. He envied Teyla and Ronon. Unlike him, they both had been granted permission to go back to their home galaxy. Sheppard started to wonder, what were they doing right now?

At least, he thought, humans had finally achieved some sort of peace on a galactic scaleâ€"in two galaxies, actuallyâ€"and he should be thankful for that. But would it last for long, or would it be a short-lived peace? Would he be in the right place if a new enemy surfacedâ€"or an old one?

The sun was now riding higher above the city, shining bright and glorious. Sheppard left the balcony and headed back into the city.

* * *

><p>Somewhere in Slipspace, en route to ONI Research Facility Trevelyan

1400 hrs. September 17, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Blackness. Nothing but blackness outside.

No one noticed from inside of the gigantic ship though, as it travelled smoothly through Slipspace. Lots of activity everywhere, especially at the bridge. They would soon drop from this extra-dimensional region of space and reach their intended destination.

The UNSC Infinity had been called from Earth to ONI Research Facility Trevelyan as a top-priority situation, but as usual, no details were given. As far as everyone aboard the ship knew, they could be dealing with an incursion from the Covenant on the facility or with some stupid request from any of the science teams stationed there. It wouldn't be the first time, but it was always boring for everyone.

Still, Captain Thomas Lasky preferred this to any kind of bloodshed, unless it was on the Covenant's part. And even then, there were always human casualties. No matter how hard someone could try, there would always be a price to pay in war. Especially since the Covenant had a human ally amongst them, and quite a dangerous one given all the secrets she knew.

Just a few months ago, a Covenant assault force had raided a colony world dedicated to studying some ancient archaeological remains not Covenant or Forerunner in origin. It had been a massacre. All research equipment, both top-notch and basic stuff, had been taken; nothing less.

It was obvious Dr. Catherine Halsey had been behind the attack. Why would the Covenant take only science stuff otherwise? Dr. Henry Glassman had finally come to the conclusion that Halsey had kept the second half of the mysterious Forerunner artifact recovered from Requiem just before its destruction, and whether she knew the true

purpose of the device or not, now she had to be looking for a way to activate it without its counterpart.

Lasky couldn't help but wonder how much damage Halsey would cause if she managed to activate the artifact. She most certainly was no longer fond of the UNSC, not after being betrayed. In a way, he could understand her, no matter what she'd done in the past. Such understanding had been what had made him sent Spartan Fireteam Majestic to rescue her before Commander Sarah Palmer could execute her.

Now, that decision weighed heavily on him.

Palmer had given him a told-you-so look when they had returned to Earth after Requiem's destruction and had had to face Admiral Serin Osman about their failed mission to eliminate Halsey. But even then, Sarah had supported him in saying the Covenant had left with Halsey before they could even have a chance to complete the given order.

Without any hard evidence proving otherwise, Osman had left the Captain clear of all charges and allowed him to keep his position as CO of the *_Infinity_* but not before telling him something that now haunted him: "Anything she causes from now on will be over your head."

And it was. He didn't regret his decision, and he knew if he had to choose, he'd do all over again. But the outcome still was too much for him now.

Lasky tried to push all these thoughts aside as the *_Infinity_* came out of Slipspace and starlight filled the bridge anew. They had emerged right next to the Forerunner shield world once known as Onyx by the humans, and after following the usual safety procedures to access the construct, the ship finally entered "orbit" inside, several kilometers above the inner surface of this world.

All of a sudden, Thomas knew for sure they would all learn the importance of their presence here. And somehow, he also knew they would be facing something more threatening than everything they were facing now. Soon.

He left the bridge and headed for the Pelican bay.

* * *

><p>Atlantis, Pacific Ocean, Earth

1000 hrs. July 14, 2013

After a short visit to the Gate room, Sheppard headed for the main laboratory. Dr. Rodney McKay would be there as usual, hard working in his ZPM research. McKay had become somewhat obsessed with discovering the secret behind one of the most powerful sources of energy ever created, claiming that "the world sorely needed it".

John suspected Rodney had ulterior motives, though. He had come to know McKay well enough to believe he was after a Nobel Prize and the worldwide recognition it would bringâ€"always the egocentric man. Of course, Sheppard couldn't help but make jokes about it all the time,

which always annoyed McKay.

But today, even before John reached the lab, Rodney was already annoyed. Maybe something had gone sideways with his work, Sheppard thought at first when he saw him.

"Hey, Rodney. How's that Nobel going?" Sheppard asked as he approached McKay.

"Not today, Sheppard", McKay answered not even turning to look at him. "I'm not in a mood for it. Something really weird has happened with the Ancients database."

"Weird. How so?"

"It's none of your business."

"OK", John said and started to walk towards the exit.

"Oh, come on! Don't act as if you're not interested", came the reply from McKay. John smiled; that strategy always worked on Rodney. He just couldn't help but to point out any kind of problem so he could later brag about solving it almost miraculously.

"It's not that I'm not interested. It's justâ€¦ none of my business."

"Alright, if you need to know, someone accessed the database's encrypted section. Happy now?"

Sheppard turned back. "What do you mean with 'encrypted'?"

"I mean 'encrypted'!" McKay said, clearly mad about it. "As in 'an isolated section of the database protected by the Ancients with an encoded algorithm in order to prevent anyone to access its contents for unknown reasons'."

"What are you talking about?" Sheppard said. "The Ancient database's contents have always been fully accessible since we first stepped through the Gate."

"That's what we used to think, until I found out an entire section on the database closed off to the public a couple of years ago. I've been trying to discover what it contains, but since the most important stuff is accessibleâ€"ZPM research, Gate addresses, lots of Ancient tech, you name itâ€", I didn't really pay too much attention to it. Besides, I didn't think someone would be able to crack the encryption."

McKay chose this moment to finally turn and see Sheppard, and John was unable to hide the guilt in his face.

"Oh no, you're kidding me", McKay said, shooting him a double-take.

"Rodneyâ€" "

"You?! Of all the people in this city, it was you?"

"I was bored!" Sheppard said. "I've been sitting in my ass for over

four years! The IOA wouldn't even let me join an SG team because 'they needed me here'. Do you know what it is like for a guy like me to just stand there and do nothing after five years of extensive action?"

"Fine, I'll give you that", McKay said, softening his expression a little, "but why would you do it in the first place?"

"Itâ€| was a favor", Sheppard answered.

"A favor? Who would ever ask you to do such a thing?"

"That would be me", said a voice coming from down the hallway. It was followed by the footsteps of Dr. Daniel Jackson as he walked into the lab. McKay seemed visibly taken aback by this, as he used to think there was some sort of rivalry between the two of them. Then again, McKay just seemed to have some sort of rivalry with everyone.

Dr. Jackson continually visited Atlantis as part of his own research on the Ancients' history, especially in the last two years. Sheppard knew he had been trying to do so ever since the city had been discovered, but only had been able to since it had come back to Earth. Surely he'd found out something very big lately; otherwise, he wouldn't have approached him so desperately to ask for his help in decoding the hidden section of the database.

Before McKay could ask or say anything else, Daniel spoke. "I didn't ask you to do it, Rodney, because I knew you'd just be too 'busy' to help, and this is important."

"Oh really? How important?" McKay seemed somewhat offended.

"Well, ever since we learned about the Alliance of Four Great Races, I've found several references about 'a legacy of responsibility for humans in every galaxy'. I used to believe it meant humans here and in Pegasus, or maybe even humans taken by the Ancients to other places far beyond the Milky Way. But what if it means something else? I mean, the Ancients were the first evolved humans that we know of, and even they had evolved in another galaxy altogether. So, what if humans have not only evolved here in this galaxy, but in others as well?"

"Now, two years ago I discovered an interesting record in the Odyssey's Asgard core. It is the oldest record mentioning the Furlingsâ€the only race in the Alliance still shrouded in mysteryâ€and according to its contents, they were also from another galaxy where humans had evolved, but that's it."

McKay and Sheppard looked at each other with confusion. "There are no more details?" McKay asked. "Nothing at all?"

"Just one thing", Daniel replied. "The record implies the Ancients had once been at the Furlings' home galaxy after they left the Milky Way, just before they arrived at Pegasus."

"And something that important should be in the Ancients database!" McKay exclaimed, apparently understanding where Daniel was going.

"Except it's not there," Daniel said. "I've already been all over it,

and there's nothing whatsoever. Unlessâ€|"

"Unless it is there", Sheppard continued, catching the drift, "and it is hidden."

"Exactly. That's why I asked you to help me decrypt it."

"Well, you could have asked me", McKay said. He no longer seemed pissed, but rather quite interested. "Have you found anything related yet?"

"So far, only one word", Daniel said. "'Precursors'".

* * *

><p>Trevelyan Airbase, 500 miles from ONI SHIELD Base

ONI RF Trevelyan

1430 hrs. September 17, 2558 (Military Calendar)

The Pelican's passenger-bay doors opened, and Captain Lasky descended from it. A pair of Huragok approached the vehicle to service it. This only happened here in Trevelyan, but still Lasky felt uneasy about it. He feared one day humans would become so dependent in these Forerunner-made aliens, it would become their weakness. It had happened before with the Covenant.

He walked towards the Warthog parked a few dozen meters from the landing pad; a corporal was already waiting at the driver's seat. As he climbed aboard, he couldn't help but smile. Every single time he was on a 'Hog, it reminded him of the occasion when he was the Master Chief's driverâ€"when they were escaping from Corbulo. That made him lose his smile as he remembered all the people he'd lost that day: Dimah, JJ, Walterâ€| Chylerâ€|

But that had been a long time ago. Now he had to focus on the mission at hand.

The ride to ONI SHIELD Baseâ€"if it could be called like thatâ€"didn't take long. The base had been established in one of the Forerunner cities built within this shield world. It had taken ONI a long time to take that step but after just a couple of years, they'd finally occupied the place. A small section of it, anyway. And Lasky had to admit it looked amazing.

The driver had to take a few more turns after he'd entered through the main gates before they arrived at one of the ONI-occupied buildings. As Lasky climbed out of the vehicle and started walking towards the entrance, he was greeted by someone he had not expected to see ever again.

"Hello, Captain Lasky. Welcome to SHIELD Base."

Lasky felt compelled to embrace the Major, but he wasn't absolutely sure if that would seem appropriate, as other people were close by. His body language might have given him away though, because it was the other man who actually took the initiative to beckon him closer.

"It's alright, Tom", he said, thrusting his arms around him and squeezing him tightly. "It's been a long time after all."

For a moment, Lasky felt lost for words, but the glee he felt made him regain his speech. "Yes it has, Sully. It surely has."

The last time he'd seen Michael "Sully" Sullivan was shortly after their rescue from Circinius-IV. They had been forced to go separate ways, since there were not enough military academies with enough space for cadets who'd just lost their school to the Covenant. He'd heard rumors about Sully being accepted into ONI and trained by them, but after a while he'd gone off the grid.

Sully had already messed with ONI's comms back at Corbulo, shortly before the Covenant attack, which could've gotten him into a lot of trouble. He'd hoped his disappearance only meant he was just so damn good he'd become some sort of operative or something like that.

And now here he was: a Major, and apparently in charge of the complex, or at least of something very important in it. It didn't matter; he was just so glad to see his good old friend again.

Sully finally let go of Lasky. "I'm sorry we'll have to skip the pleasantries and getting up-to-date on each other, but we're kind of on a time table here. Please, come this way." Sully stated to walk back inside the building, and Lasky followed.

"Can you at least tell me how did you wind up in this place?"

"Guess being one of the chief intelligence analyst helps", Sully replied, "but that's all I'm allowed to say for the moment."

Lasky was taken aback by this answer. Sully had always complained about ONI keeping secrets. Now he seemed to cope with it; he was now part of ONI, after all.

They walked for a while until they finally reached what seemed to be a conference room. There was no one else there but them, however. The doors closed behind them, and Sully motioned Lasky to one of the chairs.

"So, can you tell me what I'm doing here?" Lasky asked as he sat down.

"Well, first of all, you're here to receive a history lesson", Sully said. "Just like the old times back in Corbulo."

Lasky frowned. "And you're going to be my teacher today?"

Sully smiled. "It's very short, and I promise I'll make it easy for you. After all, you were never good in History."

"As you may already know, in the last few years we've learned lots of things about Forerunner tech here, but there's not really much about them as a race—their history, their society, their culture. Only in recent years we have been able to put together some bits and pieces we've found on several known Forerunner locations; thus, now we have learned—though vaguely, I'll admit—about both their history and that of another race which preceded them, some folks

called 'Precursors'.

"From what we've been able to piece together, these Precursors were a highly advanced race, way more advanced than the Forerunners themselves. The Precursors achieved a level of science which allowed them to build their technology based on something called "neural physics". While this normally made most Precursor artifacts effectively indestructible, the nature of their construction made them extremely susceptible to the effects of the Halo Array which, to the best of our knowledge, specifically targets neural systems."

After a short pause, Lasky asked, "Is that it? That was the history lesson?"

"We're just getting started", Sully answered. "I'm just giving you enough time to let it sink in, because what I'm about to tell you is way bigger than anything you've ever known."

"Apparently, years before the major Halo event, the Forerunners test-fired a Halo on a planet known to them as Charum Hakkor where there was a lot of Precursors structures. The weapon's effect shattered every structure, and they were all wiped out— all but one. Not much is mentioned about this single device, except for the fact that such a device seemed to be present in several worlds."

"After a long research, the Forerunner concluded the device was of an unknown origin—and by 'unknown' they meant 'not built by any species in this galaxy, extinct or otherwise'", suggesting there was another race out there which came to our galaxy just to spread this mysterious artifacts all over it. The Forerunners ended up collecting a large number of such devices and storing them in the Ark for further study."

"From their own reports, we gather the Forerunners used to believe it was through these artifacts that the Precursors seeded life in the galaxy. The Halos had been built in a shape identical to those devices to reflect the irony of their function in contrast. But when they found out the artifacts were not Precursor-made at all—"

This time the pause lasted longer, which made Lasky think the main revelation was still coming. When it didn't come, he decided to break the silence. "Something tells me this goes beyond classified, or a lot of UNSC personnel outside of ONI would already know this, including me. Which leads to an obvious question: Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because", Sully replied, "your mission is to recover these artifacts in order for us to study them and understand their true purpose, and maybe even find out where did they come from."

Lasky felt at a loss. Had he missed something during the "History lesson"?

"Sully, you're right about me not being really good in History, but I do remember reading something about the Ark being destroyed when the replacement Halo was activated to wipe out the Flood threat."

"'Thought to be destroyed'", Sully said matter-of-factly. "When we debriefed MCPO Spartan-117, we learned that the Ark had been damaged but not destroyed, according to Cortana's account."

"And I assume you've already found its location."

"Took us a while, but we have found it indeed."

"But you don't know what to expect, do you?"

"You catch up quickly, Tom. That's where Infinity and the Spartan-IV's come in", Sully said. "You are our very best bet there."

Lasky couldn't deny that. And he did understand the implications of the mission. If these devices were actually something way beyond the Forerunners themselves, they could even be the key holding secrets more powerful than anything this galaxy had ever seen.

They could give mankind the ultimate upper hand.

"What would we be looking for?" Lasky finally said, letting out a sigh.

Sully raised a remote, and a holographic display flashed above the desk. "They are similar in appearance to the Halos, but we believe them to be way smaller. Approximately seven meters in diameter."

The hologram displayed a ring-shaped device covered in weird-looking symbols. Definitely, it was not a Halo.

* * *

><p>So, what do you think? Please, review and comment. Have a nice day!

2. Chapter 2: Travel Preparations

A/N: Thank you all for your comments! I hope this chapter keeps up with your expectations, short as it is. Honestly, I intended to do it longer, but when I finished writing it just seemed ready to be released. So, here it is. Enjoy!

Thank you as well for your ideas! I'm already working on some of them.

By the way, I do want to keep updating ASAP, but since I'm still in college and with a job... Just bear with me, please. I promise you won't regret it.

* * *

><p>Atlantis conference room

Atlantis, Earth

1800 hrs. July 15, 2013

"What exactly are the implications on this?" Richard Woolsey asked.

A meeting had been called upon soon after McKay and Daniel had debriefed Wolsey and General Jack O'Neill on their discovery. All four of them were here now. Being here brought Sheppard back to the "old" days, when he and his team would work out their next mission.

"Well, there is a chance we could find the only race that remains of the Alliance, besides the Nox," Daniel said.

"Yeahâ€¦ Daniel, need I remind you that the last time you said something like that, we almost got our asses whooped by the Ori?" O'Neill said.

"It could be different this time, Jack."

"Really? What have you learned so far, anyway?"

Daniel and McKay looked at each other. "Well," McKay said, "th-the decryption process is taking longer than we first anticipated. Apparently the Ancients wanted to make sure this remained a well-kept secret, which is odd considering they even left the information in the database. I-I mean, you'd think they would have erased it in the first place if theyâ€¦"

"Rodney," Sheppard interrupted, "have you found something new or not?"

McKay paused, then said, "No, not really."

"The decrypted information is emerging randomly," Daniel said, "so we only have bits and pieces. Although I think some of it hints to an individual alliance between the Ancients and the Precursors prior to the one forged with the Asgard and the Nox, I won't be able to confirm anything until I have more to work with."

"Alright then, Dr. Jackson," Woolsey finally spoke again. "Keep working on it. In the meantime, let's move on to more pressing matters, shall we?"

"Colonel Sheppard, I think this particularly may interest you," O'Neill said.

Sheppard frowned. "How so, sir?"

"It involves you and a little space tripâ€¦ to Pegasus." Sheppard's eyes immediately brightened.

"Just a few days ago," Woolsey said, "our people back in Pegasus found an Ancient manufacturing facility. Apparently, its purpose was dedicated to building Aurora-class battleships."

"I start to like the sound of that," Sheppard said.

"Unfortunately, there was only one ship remaining there, and because of the collateral damage caused to the Travelers by the activation of the Attero device a few years ago, we thought it would actually be of

more benefit if we turned it over to them."

Sheppard was confused. "That wasn't our fault entirely. And how could that be of more benefit to us, anyway?"

Woolsey grinned. "Well, we gave them the ship, and they allowed us to keep all but one of the ZPMs stored in the facility."

Even McKay reacted to that last sentence. "Did you just say 'Zed-PM'?"

"Actually, Rodney," Sheppard said, "I think he said ZPMs. Plural."

Now Rodney's eyes were wide open. "How many of them?"

"Eight," Woolsey answered. "Minus the one we're giving them for their ship."

"Seven total," Sheppard said matter-of-factly. "Three for Atlantis, and the remaining ones for the _Daedalus_, the _Apollo_, the _Hammond_."

"And Stargate Command," O'Neill concluded. "You never know when we could use one."

"But where does the space trip fit in all this?" Sheppard asked.

"The _Daedalus_ has been appointed to retrieve the ZPMs," Woolsey said. "We could send someone through the Gate, but without the necessary control crystal, they won't be able to dial back. I know you've been away from the action for quite some time, and I thought you might want to, at least, get out of the city. For _real_, if you know what I mean. What better opportunity than this one?"

Sheppard couldn't believe it. Not the part of Woolsey letting him go, but Earth's increasing luck—their enemies defeated, humans acquiring more technology now than ever, the possibility of a new ally. How much luckier could they get? And for how long?

What the hell, he thought, _let's enjoy it while it lasts._

"So," he asked, "when do we leave?"

* * *

><p>In orbit above Earth, Sol System

UNSC _Infinity_, S-Deck

1200 hrs. September 23, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"They're overdue," Captain Lasky said. There was a slight trace of concern in his voice.

He was standing at Palmer's command post overseeing S-Deck, waiting for the new Spartan-IV fireteams assigned to _Infinity_. Sully had advised him to take as many Spartans as possible for the mission but wouldn't say anything else. Lasky was surprised of his own patience

regarding ONI and their psychological need to keep all the secrets they could.

"The best things in life always take time, Captain." Roland, the ship's AI, was his usual condescending self—which meant he was bored and would soon start looking for ways to entertain himself. As long as he didn't commandeer the ship and take it for a joyride all over the planetary system—

"I just hope this turns out to be only a precautionary measure and not an actual necessity, Roland," Lasky said, then tapped the comms console in front of him. "Dr. Glassman, status?"

"All systems are in the green, Captain," came the response. "We're ready to leave on your order."

"Were you able to boost the Slipspace drive's efficiency?"

"As much as I could, but unless you want to burn them out, I'm afraid it's still going to take us a week before we reach our final destination."

Lasky turned to see Roland's avatar. "Please, break it down for me again."

The AI's light became slightly brighter. He used to do that a lot when asked about something, as if proud to become a teacher to anyone who would listen. "We've all grown accustomed to single-jump trips since we developed our Faster-Than-Light engines, because the distances we traverse are reasonably short. However, voyages this long require several jumps in order to compensate for the long-term effects of the disturbance caused by our passing through Slipspace—"

"Roland, I said 'break it down', not 'make it harder to understand'."

"Sorry, Captain. Basically, we have to make several jumps or the ship will be torn apart once we come out of Slipspace."

Lasky nodded. As long as they managed to fulfill their mission, time was not a problem.

"Captain, Commander Palmer has arrived with the new Spartan fireteams," Roland announced. "Shall I start preparing our first jump?"

"Not yet, Roland," Lasky replied. "We're still waiting for our special guests."

"Ah, you mean Major Sullivan and his personal security detail?"

"They are more than just a security detail. You'll know when they arrive, but try not to make a fuss over it, would you?"

"Aye, aye, Captain. Do you want to see the new Spartans?"

"Yeah, why not? Might just as well see the faces of more people I'm responsible of with the hopes they will survive in combat."

Lasky was certain these Spartans had been given the best training possible. It couldn't be otherwise, considering their mentors were all of the surviving Spartan-II's and some of the -III's. But still, he cared deeply about their fates being in his hands.

He'd have to make sure to bring them all back home breathing and in one piece.

"Captain, your special guests haveâ€¦" Roland started to speak but paused for a few moments, something that rarely happened. He had to have been truly impressed and taken by surprise by what he was seeing.

"Roland, show them to their quarters. And don't say a word about this to anyone, please. As much as I'd love to share this with the rest of the crew, I've been ordered to keep this a secret."

"ONI?"

"Is there anyone else who orders you to keep a secret these days?"

"Point taken. Ready for your announcement, Captain?"

Lasky nodded once more. He took a deep breath then spoke through the ship-wide comms. "Attention all hands! We're going into emergency Slipspace protocol. All non-essential personnel, report to your designated Cryo-chambers. Slipspace jump in T-minus 5 minutes."

Lasky headed back to the bridge, and by the time everyone was in their respective placesâ€"either in a Cryo-tube or in a relevant postâ€"he was already overseeing the final steps prior to the jump.

Moments later, Infinity broke orbit and disappeared into the depths of space. The mission had begun.

* * *

><p>Somewhere in space, 218 light-years from the Milky Way's center

September 24, 2558 (Human Military Calendar)

The peace and quiet of the void beyond the Milky Way galaxy was suddenly broken as a Slipspace window began to open. The Glorified Wisdom, a Corvette-class Covenant ship, emerged from it, its command center crawling with Sangheili technicians.

One of them immediately spoke up. "Shipmistress, we've reached the coordinates."

"We have a very large object on sensors", another one announced only a few seconds later. "Forerunner architecture confirmed."

The hologram projector in the middle of the bridge immediately flashed, but the Shipmistress ignored it and moved towards the massive screen which served as a window. She preferred to look at

this feat of Forerunner technology in all of its glory, not reduced to a simple holo-projection. And for a moment, everyone else paused and did the same thing as herâ€”they all gazed at the magnificent starfish-shaped artifact created by the gods millennia ago.

"Perfect." As everyone returned to their respective duties, the Shipmistress just staredâ€”and smiled. She was the only living being aboard this ship that could actually generate this particular gesture.

She was the only member of her species among the Covenant altogether.

"Send a message to Shipmaster 'Mdama", Shipmistress Catherine Halsey said. "We've found the Ark."

* * *

><p>Erratum: it's not 218, but 2 to the 18th (in other words, 262,144 light years). This thing just won't let me place the superscript!
*</p>

3. Chapter 3: Questions and Complications

A/N: Sorry for taking this long to update! I just wanted to make sure I got it right. I'm sure you'll be pleased with the result.

I'm hoping to keep updating more regularly now. I'm still in school and with a job, but now I've finished structuring the main ideas for the next few chapters. I've got to tell you, I'm as excited as some of you may already be about how this story is developing!

Anyway, here is Chapter 3. Enjoy!

P.S.: Thanks again for such nice reviews!

* * *

><p>Janus' lab

Atlantis, Earth

1200 hrs. July 27, 2013

C'mon, Daniel thought, _just a little more_.

He was sitting in front of an Ancient screen displaying the equivalent of a computer progress bar. According to it, the decryption process was at 98â€”no, 99% percent now. It wouldn't be long.

Almost two weeks had passed since their discovery of the hidden section of the Ancient database. He had tried to be as patient as he could, but when he and Rodney had realized that the information available so far was nothing but a jumble and that it would take several days for the mainframe of Atlantis to complete the decryption

process, he had decided to return to the SGC and do some research of his ownâ€”yet again.

Whatever little information he had been able to understand had only left him with more unanswered questions. He had seen a couple of Asgard and Nox terms, as well as some symbols he hadn't seen before, among the decrypted data. He had spent a few days going all over his reference material, hoping to find something that might look similar to those unknown symbols, but he had come up empty.

Then he had an idea. It had nothing to do with the symbols themselves, but perhapsâ€”if they were indeed related to these "Precursors"â€”he would be able to find out where they had originated.

He had come back to Atlantis three days ago and requested to use the same lab he and Rodney had discovered five years before: Janus' secret lab. Here, in absolute peace and quiet, he had gone over all the data related to the _Destiny_ and its planned course. From what the _Destiny_'s crew had been able to inform, one of the galaxies the ship had visited after starting its journey was Pegasus. Perhaps it had also visited the Precursors home galaxy before?

It didn't take him long to find out that Pegasus had actually been the second galaxy the _Destiny_ had been at. And if the galaxy the Ancients had visited before arriving at Pegasus had also been the first "stop" along the _Destiny_'s path, thenâ€”theoretically speakingâ€”the only candidate according to the Ancient record was the Andromeda galaxy.

Finally, today he had come here since before sunrise to start translating the data, as surely now it would be virtually complete and coherent. He had a theory; now he only needed to confirm it. And for that, he needed to dig deeper into the hidden database.

After more than 6 hours, he had finally reached a conclusion. Butâ€”|

No, it can't be.

"Any progress?" It was McKay's voice. When had he entered into the lab?

"It's another database," Daniel answered, turning back to see Rodney.

"Come again?"

"It's not a section of the Ancient database at all; i-i-it's a separate database."

"What are you talking about? What does itâ€”?"

"It's the database of the Alliance!" Daniel said. "That's why there were traces of Asgard and Nox languages. It's everything on all of the four great races!"

"No, that can't be."

"That's exactly what I thought, but there's no other explanation. At

least from what I've been able to translate so far."

"Daniel, there's no way it can be the Alliance database. From what we know, those races didn't become allies until after the Ancients had returned from Pegasus. Unless the Ancients dared return back to Atlantis toâ€" McKay paused then made the same face he always made when he realized something big.

"Rodney?"

He remained silent for a few more seconds. "Maybe they did."

"Did what?"

"Come back to Atlantis. It would explain everything." Daniel frowned. "Have you read a report about our encounter with an alternate version of Dr. Weir during our first year in the city?"

"I don't remember the details."

"She told us about her encounter with Janus, among other things. She said he'd taught her how to rotate all three Zed-PM's every 3,300 years or so, instead of using all three simultaneously, to prevent the power from falling below critical levels, which would've caused the shields to fail and the city to get completely flooded."

"But wasn't there a failsafe which would allow the city to rise up to the ocean surface if such a thing happened?"

"Yes, but that's not the point. See, after I learned all about that, I had a look over the power record from the last 10,000 years. It turns out that there were some anomalies every now and then, but since I was unable to determine what it had been, I just ignored it."

"What's your point, Rodney?"

"Maybe each of those anomalies is proof that the Ancients kept coming back here for something, maybe to create this databaseâ€" "

"â€"as a backup," Daniel completed, "in case something happened to the device we found several years ago at the planet they used as a meeting place."

"But why the need to encrypt and hide it?"

"I think that's a no-brainer. Just think, if you were an Ancient hiding a valuable amount of information, would you just leave it available to anyone? Or would you wait for the right people to find it eventually."

"I guess you're right," McKay said. "So, what have you found on the Precursors?"

"Well, it turns out that the Precursors are not the Furlings after all," Daniel said. "But they did interact a lot after they met. Apparently, these guys were like the Ancients in our galaxyâ€"seeders of life, highly advanced, large empire. But they also believed in something called the 'Mantle of Responsibility'. According to this belief, it was up to the Precursors to ensure that every race in

their galaxy was at peace with each other and among themselves. They also believed that one day a special race would evolve up to a certain point where they could become their inheritors.

"Now, even though the Ancients didn't remain long in the Precursors' galaxy, both races left a strong impression in the other and influenced each other in a special way. They kept in touch for several millennia until, all of a sudden, the Precursors just seemed to vanish completely. The Ancients thought about going back to find out what had happened, but in the end they decided to remain in Pegasus and look after the humans they'd already seeded there."

"OK, here's an obvious question," McKay said. "If the Furlings are not the Precursors, then who are they?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe the Precursors' inheritors?"

The Ancient screen suddenly flashed; the decryption was complete.

"Hmmâ€¦ this is interesting," Daniel said.

"What?"

"Look, here. This is the only sentence written in Ancient related to the Furling records in the database. It says, 'all these secrets will become clear atâ€¦'"

Both Daniel and McKay kept staring at the screen for a few moments.

"Is that what I think it is?" McKay finally said.

"If you think it's a 9-chevron address," Daniel said, "then yes, it is."

* * *

><p>In Slipspace, en route to Forerunner Installation 00, designate "The Ark"

UNSC _Infinity_

1900 hrs. September 30, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"Two minutes from our destination, Captain" Roland said.

The ship's AI had been monitoring everything aboard the shipâ€¦"literally, everythingâ€¦"for an entire week now, making sure everything was in place and in order. Except for the people at S-Deck who had awoken during the last gap between jumps, most of the crew was still in Cryo-sleep, just waiting until they reached their destination. Power generations, life support, and every system aboard the Infinityâ€¦not even Major Sullivan and hisâ€¦| unusual bodyguards could escape from his careful tending.

Quite frankly, he was bored. After all the action he'd seen at Requiem, this was not challenging at all. He could only hope there would be something more interesting to do once they reached the Ark. But how could there be? The installation would be completely

abandoned, wouldn't it?

"Thanks, Roland," the captain said. "Stand ready to wake everyone up. And tell Major Sullivan to come up here, please."

Roland just nodded. The captain's old acquaintance had insisted in remaining awake for the entire trip. Roland couldn't help but wonder what his intentions were. After all, if he was only here as an ONI representative, he wouldn't have brought any kind of security detail, let alone the special one he had brought. Was he planning on going to the surface by himself? Did he have any special orders? Was he aware of something else?

"All Cryo-chambers report ready to open pods, Captain. And Major Sullivan is already on his way here."

"Thought he'd be. Thanks."

"Stand-by, Captain. We're returning to normal space in sixty secondsâ€¦ fifty secondsâ€¦" As his countdown progressed, Roland could see expectationâ€"and yes, even a little tensionâ€"building up in the faces of everyone in the bridge. Soon they would all know if the length of their trip had been worth it.

At thirty seconds, Major Sullivan came into the bridge. "Captain Lasky, talk to me."

"We're just about to find out how accurate your intel is, Sully," was the captain's response.

Twenty secondsâ€¦

"You'll see. I'm telling you, we've been at this for a long while now and are confident the results will be just perfect."

Ten secondsâ€¦

Lasky said nothing else.

Fiveâ€¦ fourâ€¦ threeâ€¦ twoâ€¦ oneâ€¦

As the Infinity emerged from Slipspace, the view port became filled with a bright light which was being reflected from both the surface of a large body of water and from the snow covering the peaks of the mountain range surrounding it.

The ship was close to the surface. Very close.

Roland, the only one aboard with a fast enough reaction time, immediately took over the ship's controls and pulled the Infinity uprightâ€"a feat in itself, considering the size and mass of the ship. In just a few seconds, it was shooting upwards toward the atmosphere, and with a few more maneuvers, the AI turned the ship in such a way it would now remain facing it from a safe distance, several thousand miles above the surface.

All the while, he had also been monitoring the reaction of everyone else in the bridge and all over the ship. Needless to say, everyone was shocked at first, and he even had seen fear in some faces. Captain Lasky himself was breathing heavily, trying to regain his

composure.

But now, everyone was standing amazed at the sight of the imposing Forerunner installation they had arrived at. There was no doubt; this was the Ark.

Then something appeared on sensors. _Crap._

"Well Sully," Lasky finally said, "I'd say your intel was accurate, after all. Up to the point where we almostâ€"

"Captain," Roland interrupted, "the ship's sensors are picking up the presence of three _CCS_-class Covenant cruisers at 30 kilometers closing in on our position, and fast."

The captain didn't wait to hear more. "All hands, battle stations!" he shouted, then turned to see the AI's avatar. "Roland, have all of our weapons systems ready. I want to be able to blast them out of space the second we have a firing solution."

That won't be difficult, Roland thought. _Infinity_ boasted a significant missile network that could be implemented for ship-to-ship combat, anti-air defense, and orbital gunfire support for Marine forces. Even the Covenant fleet back at Requiem had been wise enough to flee into the planet rather than stay outside and face the mightiest ship in the UNSC fleet.

Placed throughout it were 1,100 missile pods of three types: Archer, Rapier, and Howler, totaling the ship's missile payload at 25,900 missiles. Close-in defense against enemy missiles, fighters, and boarding craft was provided by the ship's M965 Fortress point defense system, a network of 830 70mm automatic cannons. It also had a number of Mark 2488 Magnetic Accelerator Cannonsâ€"or Mass Drivers, as some preferred to call themâ€"placed along the ship.

And of course, the _Infinity_'s primary armament was three CR-03 Series-8 Magnetic Accelerator Cannons and two reverse-engineered Mark I Energy Projectors. Originally, the ship had four MAC guns and only one energy projector until, after the First Battle of Requiem, FLEETCOM decided it would be better for it to have two such weapons as they had proven to be incredibly effective against energy shielding. Back then, considering the possibility of a Forerunner attack and knowing against whom they would be fighting, it had been better to be prepared.

The three MAC guns, however, would be more than enough to deal with these three Covenant creaking tubs.

As the ship moved into firing position, Roland made sure those guns were already fully charged and ready to fire. The AI immediately began stated to acquire firing solutions, assigning a ship to each MAC respectively.

"We're in position, Captain, ready to fire on your mark," said the lieutenant assigned to the weapons station.

Lasky didn't even take a moment to take a look at the ships about to be destroyed. "Fire!"

And before anyone could even blink, the three enemy ships disappeared

engulfed in white-blue flames. The threat was goneâ€"at least for now. Surely more ships would follow this ones at some point, and who knew how many troops they had deployed already at the Ark's surface? They would need the Spartans on the ground. And soon.

Roland knew Captain Lasky had thought the exact same thing he'd just thought as he approached the holotable and once again turned to see him. "I need a complete surface scan. We're going to require suitable places to deploy our fireteams and to start building bases."

Roland quickly made the requested scan, pinpointed some ideal coordinates, and relayed the information to all the Pelican pilots already on station and prepared to leave. He also displayed this information on the bridge's holotable for the captain to see. Now the only thing needed for it all to begin was his order.

"All Spartan fireteams prepped and ready for launch, Captain."

Lasky acknowledged. "Commander Palmer?" he said on the comm. "The word is given."

* * *

><p>Gate room

Atlantis, Earth

1500 hrs. August 3, 2013

Daniel was standing on the balcony overlooking the Gate room in Atlantis, watching as the crew downstairs prepared a MALP to send it through. Woolsey was standing beside him, supervising everything.

Daniel had just returned from Washington D.C. the day before, after having been at Homeworld Command for a few days. Trying to convince Jack O'Neill of using the Atlantis Stargateâ€"and of course the city's ZPMsâ€"to dial the 9-chevron address he'd found a week before had not been easy, but he had been thoroughly investigating and he was well prepared with all the information necessary to defend his stance. Finally, Jack had granted him the permission to do as Daniel requested.

Jack's orders had been simple: dial the address, and in case of a successful connection, determine the amount of power being used, then send a MALP and determine viability. If too much power was being used, they would have to wait until Sheppard and his team brought back the new ZPMs to dial again; if notâ€|

McKay was working on a console behind Daniel, trying to interface a virtual DHD with the Gate systems. He had already deactivated the bypass command he'd developed for the Midway Station years ago and which now prevented the Atlantis Gate from superseding the one at Stargate Command. The virtual DHD, a computer model of a standard Milky Way galaxy DHD, was meant to temporarily replace the one on Atlantis so that the address could be dialed exactly as it had been found. They had already learned from the Destiny expedition that a 9-chevron address was more of a special code to reach a specific location rather than an actual set of coordinates, so this measure was necessary.

Daniel had learned a lot about the Ancient-Precursor alliance in the past few days. Not only was he certain now that they were originally from the Andromeda galaxy, but he had also discovered that the Ancients had left a small number of humans on one of the many planets in that galaxy by request of the Precursors. Still, the purpose behind this action had not been made clear by the Ancients. Now, he could only wonder if they would find humans the same way they had on Pegasus. And how advanced would they be?

"We're good to go," McKay said.

Daniel turned to see Woolsey, and they both nodded. "Dial it up," Woolsey said. Rodney stroke a key in his computer, and the dialing sequence began.

Though of a newer model, the Gate was dialing slowly, the same way the one at the SCG would. It took it a full minute to get to the eighth chevron, and by then everyone was already nervous.

"Chevron nineâ€|" McKay's voice was trembling. "Chevron nineâ€| is locked!"

The Stargate became alive, the usual _kawoosh_ emerging from it then settling itself into the puddle that made up the event horizon. Daniel smirked.

"Zed-PM power consumptionâ€| is just fine. We might be able to keep the connection for a few minutes and still have enough juice in them to dial two more times."

Woolsey addressed someone else in the control room. "Send the MALP through."

The probe started to move towards the Gate. When it crossed the event horizon, Daniel, McKay, and Woolsey walked up to the monitoring station. A few seconds later, they began to receive a video feed.

"What are we looking at?" Daniel asked.

"I think it's a large room. The walls seem to be decorated withâ€|"

The three edged closer to the screen. They couldn't believe their eyes.

"Stargates?" Woolsey said.

"So it seems. They appear to be of the first model, like the one aboard the _Destiny_," Rodney said. "Telemetry indicates a viable atmosphere, no presence of radiation. We'd have no problem to go there."

"Why would a room be filled with Stargates?" Woolsey asked, still confused apparently.

"That's what we're going to find out," Daniel said, already dialing Jack's number on his cellphone.

"O'Neill."

"Jack, the address is still working. We're sending you all the information in a moment."

"Is there something nice on the other side?"

"Let's just say it's worth putting the team back together again."

"I'll call them up," Jack said.

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC _Infinity_

2200 hrs. October 7, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Lasky couldn't help but stand in awe at the sight of such a marvelous construction. Even Requiem paled in comparison to this place. It seemed so bright, so peaceful, and yet so majestic and mighty.

They had been there for a week now. The Spartans had found virtually no resistance on the surface so far, so it was safe to assume the cruisers had not yet deployed that many troops by the time the _Infinity_ had arrived. That, or they were hiding somewhere in the installation. It was so massive they could choose any secluded spot in it and stay there for as long as they needed to, just waiting for reinforcements to arrive.

For now, the ship had already been sending supplies and materials needed to build up several research bases at various key locations, including the Cartographer and the Citadel where Master Chief had stopped the Prophet of Truth from firing the entire Halo Array.

Preliminary reports from both thorough surface scans and the science teams working down there indicated that many of the Ark's main systems and structures had indeed been destroyed or damaged as a result of the firing of the replacement Halo ring, but had since been automatically rebuilt or repaired. Still, the Halo constructing systems were still offline, whichâ€"according to some of the science guysâ€"was odd considering it should have been one of the first systems to be repaired.

For the moment, Lasky didn't care about that. Their mission was to decommission the remaining Halo rings, not to build more.

"Captain," Roland said, appearing on the holotable behind him, "sensors are picking up an anomalous energy signature coming from the surface of the planet."

Lasky turned and walked up to the holotable. A hologram of the Ark was being displayed above it, with a blinking light right in the middle of one of the Ark's larger arms. "What do you mean with 'anomalous'?"

"It's like nothing the sensors have detected so far on the surface."

It's like nothing we've ever detected on any other Forerunner installation. As far as I can tell, there is nothing in that sector that could require such a large amount of energy. I mean, it is inside of a structure, but it is nowhere near large enough to need so much power."

The hologram of the Ark started to become larger until it displayed only the structure Roland was talking about.

"Do we have any team near that area?"

"None, sir."

"How long until we can deploy one there?"

"I'm not sure that would be wise as of yet. For all we know, the place could be leaking high levels of radiation."

"Alright. Keep an eye on it, see what else you can find about it."

"Aye, Captain."

Lasky walked back to the bridge window. He tried to find the possible source of that mystery energy signature with the naked eye, but it was impossible. A few minutes later, Roland told him the energy signature had disappeared.

Not three seconds later, the AI also told him Sully was calling him from his quarters. He walked once again towards the holotable and tapped the comms. "What is it, Sully?"

"Is it true the ships sensors just pick up something strange down there?"

"Whaâ€"? How did youâ€"?"

"Request permission to take a team down there to investigate."

Lasky frowned. "Negative. We still don't know if it is safe to go there."

"I could find out for you."

"How did you even know the sensors had picked up something?"

"Please, Lasky, let me go down there."

Lasky knew he could spend some time trying to make Sully talk, but it would be pointless. ONI operatives always had a way of knowing things, and they would never say how, no matter how much someone tried. But whatever the reasons, he still couldn't let him go down.

"I said negative, Sully. That's my final word."

The comm link went dead. Lasky walked away from the table.

Everything else remained normal for a long while, until an alert started to sound all over the ship. _"Warning. Unauthorized Pelican launch at Bay 6."_

"Roland, what's going on?" Lasky asked.

"It seems Major Sullivan decided to ignore your orders," Roland answered. "He just took a Pelican and left."

"Just like that?! Aren't there security measures to prevent such a thing from happening?"

"He overrode them all. Don't ask me how."

"Open a channel. Let me talk to him."

A green light flashed on the holotable. "Sully, what are you doing?"

"You wouldn't let me go down there, my friend. You forced me into this. But don't worry, I'll be back in no time."

"Sullyâ€"

_"And don't even think about sending anyone else to follow me. I'm _dead_ serious here."_

"Sully!"

The channel went off.

Lasky didn't know what to think about his old friend's actions. He thought about firing a warning shot at the Pelican, but would that be wise? What if the shot actually hit him and sent him down to the surface on an uncontrolled re-entry?

"Roland, you think he's headed to the location you mentioned before?"

"I'd say that's a safe bet."

He couldn't let him go, no matter what he'd said. "Get me Commander Palmer."

After a few moments, her voice sounded on the comm. _"Palmer here."_

"Palmer, do you have any Fireteam available?"

"Fireteam Hammer could be ready in five minutes. Why?"

"Major Sullivan, just left the ship without authorization. I need them to go after him." Lasky paused for a moment. "You too gear up, please. Go with them."

_"Right away___, Captain. Any ideas on why he left the way he did?"_

Lasky lowered his head, his mind trying to comprehend what had

happened to the man that had once been his best friend. "No."

* * *

><p>Somewhere in hyperspace, en route to M9R-748, Pegasus galaxy

USS George Hammond

1700 hrs. August 3, 2013

Sheppard was standing in the middle of the bridge. After a long trip of two weeks, they were finally about to drop out of hyperspaceâ€| back at Pegasus.

Soon he would be able to see his team, his family, again. Teyla, Ronon, even the Athosians who had been invited over to the planet. Sheppard grinned. Teyla hadn't been the one to suggest that; it had been him. He knew she would never ask for such a thing, and he'd done so not only with her in mind, but her son as well. After all, what kind on a childhood would he have if he grew up without his own peopleâ€| without his father?

"Relax John," Colonel Samantha Carter said to him. "I hadn't seen you this excited sinceâ€| Actually, I had never seen you so excited before."

"Are you not?" Sheppard answered. "This is also your first time back in Pegasus in five years, and the first time you come here in your own ship."

"Guess you could say that," Sam said. "Still, it's just a short visit, then I'm going back to searching for a planet with a Naquadria core from which to dial the Destiny. And you'll be going back to your job as second in command in Atlantis."

"You know, I never believed I'd ever say this, but I don't want to be second in command anymore. This is where the real action is."

Sam shrugged. "Not that much, remember? Our people have found the Wraith on very rare occasions since they came back here. Even when they have, there have been no Wraith ships involved at all."

Sheppard was about to speak again but was cut short by the lieutenant at the navigation station. "Colonel, we're about to drop out of hyperspace." Sam nodded.

John just turned back to the window. "Remind me of the reason why we're going to the planet where they discovered the ZPMs instead of picking them up at our base."

"We're picking up seven ZPMs. That many of them will certainly give off a very big energy signature. Our base wouldn't be able to mask so much energy, but if they remained undetected for so many years, then the Ancient facility where they were found surely has a way to mask the energy readings."

"But if there are no Wraith ships out thereâ€|"

"I didn't say that. I said we've found no more ships, but that doesn't mean they're out there somewhere. It's just a precautionary measure."

As the ship came out of hyperspace, they received a transmission from the _Daedalus_. _"Good to see you arrived in one piece, Colonel."_

"Same here, Colonel," Sam answered. The _Daedalus_ had left Earth only a few hours before the _Hammond_ had, but their instructions were to deliver first some supplies to the Pegasus Forward Base and then catch up with Colonel Carter. Apparently, they both had arrived at the same time.

"Colonel," someone said, "sensors are detecting a ship coming from the other side of the planet. Hull configuration suggests it's a Wraith cruiser."

Sheppard turned to see Sam again. "What were you saying about there being no action or Wraith ships anymore?"

Sam didn't answer him. "Raise the shields and power up the Asgard weapons. _Daedalus_, be advised, we have a Wraith cruiser closing in to our position."

_"Roger that, _Hammond_, we're readying our weapons,"_ Colonel Steven Caldwell said over the comms._ "We're also picking up a distress signal coming from inside the Ancient facility on the planet."_

"Yeah, we're receiving it too," Sam answered. Her face sobered. "It's your team, John. They're trapped inside the facility, surrounded by Wraith troops."

"Can we beam them out?"

"Negative. They must have deactivated their locator beacons."

"Could you beam me down there?"

Sam turned to see him. "I think so, but first we should deal with that cruiser."

"Wait. What if the Wraith have already captured some of our people?"

Sam hesitated, then she said to the weapons officer, "Try to disable the cruiser without destroying it, just in case." She also advised the _Daedalus_ not to destroy the cruiser until they were sure there were no humans aboard.

As the Wraith cruiser came into view, Sheppard couldn't help but think it looked slightly different, but he couldn't notice the exact differences.

"Cruiser is in range, Colonel," the weapons officer said.

"Fire Asgard weapons," Sam said.

The concentrated beam of plasma streaked through space, hitting the

cruiserâ€|

â€|and dissipating itself amidst a barrier of light.

No one on the bridge could believe their eyes.

"That cruiser has shields?!" Sheppard exclaimed.

4. Chapter 4: New Enemies and Traitors

****A/N: I did it! Somehow, I managed to update in just a week. I hope you all like it.****

****By the way, I'm not going to be able to update next week, but I promise to do my best to update the week after that. In the meantime, wish me luck in my exams.****

****And once again, thank you all for your reviews. Enjoy!****

* * *

><p>In orbit above M9R-748, Pegasus galaxy

****_USS George Hammond_****

****1715 hrs. August 3, 2013****

"They're firing on us!" Sheppard exclaimed.

Both ship's shields took the blunt of a large volley of shots from the cruiser's energy weapons.

"Shields are down to ninety percent," the officer at Sam's right said.

"Colonel", Caldwell said, _"their weapons seem to have been upgraded too. Our shields are not going to be able to resist this kind of firepower for long."_

"What about _their_ shields?" Sam replied. "Did our weapons have any effect whatsoever?"

"Minimal."

"Sam, beam me down to the facility," Sheppard said.

"Johnâ€" "

"Sam, I'm of no use here, and right now I don't think it would make a difference if I were! I need to know my team is well. Plus, we need those ZPMs. We can't let them fall into Wraith hands."

Sam hesitated, then she signaled her officer. But after a few tries, he shook his head. He couldn't do as Sheppard requested.

"It's not working, John. The facility is probably protected with security measures to prevent it."

"Then let me take an F-302. Once I'm in, I might be able to

deactivate whatever is blocking us from using the Asgard transport."

"I'm sorry, I can't risk it. The cruiser could knock you out of space before you even reach the atmosphere." Sam paused, apparently thinking of something. "But maybe we can bring the ship down to the facility. Hopefully we can coordinate with our people down there to allow us access to the hangar."

She pressed the comm in her chair. "_Daedalus_, we're going down to the surface. Can you keep that cruiser busy for a while?"

"We'll do the best we can, but hurry. Our shields are already at eighty percent, and quite frankly I don't want to test how much more they can resist against this new weaponry.""

"Roger that," Sam said. She pressed another button on her chair. "_Hammond_ to all teams on the surface, come in." Silence. "_Hammond_ to all teams on the surface, please respond."

"Colonel Carter, is that you?" It was Teyla's voice.

"Teyla, what's going on?" Sheppard asked.

"John! We're pinned down inside the facility. We've got several wounded here, including Ronon.""

"Ronon?!" The big, mean Satedan injured?

"John, these things are not Wraith. At least not anymore. Something's happened to them; they're stronger and more vicious than any others we've encountered before.""

The ship was already descending into the surface. "Teyla, listen to me. Sam is bringing down the Hammond to the facility. We need you to find someone who can allow the ship inside." Once again, silence. "Teyla, did you copy?" Still nothing. "Sam, did we lose the connection?"

"No, the channel is still open."

"Teyla! We can't beam you out of there. We need you to open up the hangar doors so we can get inside and take you out. Do you copy?"

The facility was growing larger in the view port. It was massive, enough to harbor at least fifteen Aurora-class battleships. Suddenly, the roof of one of the hangars started to open. As the ship started to get into position to enter, Sheppard was able to see a large number of creatures crawling up the walls of the facility, trying to reach the roof entrance.

What were those things?

"Samâ€|" Sheppard said.

"Yeah, I saw them too," she replied. Then, to the weapons officer, "Have the railguns trained at those things. If one of them as much as gets at thirty feet from the entrance, shoot it."

"Yes ma'am," was the answer.

The radio came alive again. _"John, they will be inside soon!"_

"Don't worry, we're almost there," he said. "Well done, Teyla."

Right before the ship entered, the sound of several railguns firing thundered throughout the ship's hull. By the time the ship was finally settling down, the roof was closing again; the creatures had fled, possibly out of fear from the weapons used to fight them.

Sheppard immediately headed to the armory. He was geared up in less than a minute; then he rushed to the ring room aboard the ship. Once out of the ship, he started to call out Teyla's name. His voice echoed all over the massive hangar. He saw only one structure inside, possibly some sort of control room. _So that's how she got the roof open so fast_, he thought.

"Sheppard, our shields may be restored shortly," Sam said, _"but if we're to destroy that cruiser, we're going to need to install a ZPM before we return up there."_

"Copy that," he replied. He walked toward the control room, finding out the entrance was sealed by a large bulkhead door. If he'd found himself surrounded by a large assaulting force, that's where he would be, at least until reinforcements arrived; otherwise, instead of being a defensible position, it would have become a kill box.

Sheppard placed himself next to the door. He knocked a single word in Morse code: the first name of Teyla's son. He hoped that would be enough to ease Teyla's mind. After a few moments, the bulkhead opened; she was waiting on the other side, her P-90 aimed at him.

"John!" Teyla exclaimed. She dropped the weapon and embraced him. John could feel her body shaking. Was she scared? What could possibly have scared her?

"It's alright, Teyla," he said. "I'm here. It's over."

"No, it's not. Those things will find their way in here pretty soon. Theyâ€| theyâ€|" She seemed to be lost for words at best, in the verge of going into shock at worst.

"Teyla, calm down. Where is everybody?"

"In here," she answered, regaining her composure. Sheppard went into the room; several wounded were resting against the wall, Ronon included. The others were already in shock. John realized he had been lucky, as Teyla had been the only one who had been able to keep it together just enough to look after the rest.

"_Hammond_, this is Sheppard," John spoke into his radio. "We're going to need a medical team standing by, and also some help to move these people."

"I think we can do better than that. We're picking up their locator beacons' signals again. We can beam you all aboard now that we're inside. Do you have the ZPMs?"

Sheppard turned to see Teyla, who nodded and walked to one of the corners of the room. Three large cases were sitting there, guarded by two soldiers with a wide-eyed expression. Sheppard opened all three cases to find three ZPMs in one and two in each of the other two. "Affirmative. All seven ZPMs are safe." He signaled Teyla to help him with one of the cases while he took the other two. "You may proceed with transport."

He felt the familiar tingling of the Asgard beam transporter. A second later, he found himself again inside the ship, along with the others who were at the control room. Then he realized something: if Teyla was right, the ship's shields would keep them safe, but without someone to retract the roof again, they would be trapped inside the facility.

Someone would have to stay in the control room and make sure it didn't fall into enemy hands until the ZPM was installed aboard.

He was willing to do it, but first he needed to know what he would be dealing with.

The EMTs began taking away the injured. Sheppard walked next to a gurney in which they had already placed Ronon. His eyes were closed, and John could see a large wound on his side, but he was breathing, which was a good sign. "Hey, Chewie. How are you doing?" Ronon opened his eyes; John could see fear in them, something he had rarely, if ever, seen before. "Calm down buddy, you're safe now. Look, I need to know what happened out there."

Ronon started babbling almost in a whisper. John couldn't make out what he was saying. "I'm sorry, I didn't get it." In that moment, Ronon grabbed John by the collar.

"They're not dead!" he said, looking directly into Sheppard's eyes. He thought for a moment his friend had said the same thing Teyla had said before, but Ronon repeated the word "dead" again, making John wonder of whom—or what—was he talking about.

"The Wraith—" Ronon continued. "It was feeding off Captain Brown—h-he started to change— to grow— tendrils— Oh, God! The growls— the howling—" Tears were already forming in his eyes.

"Ronon—" Sheppard began, placing his hand in his teammate's shoulder.

"DON'T!" Ronon exclaimed, flinching. "Don't let them feed off me! Don't let them get close to me. They're not dead! They're NOT DEAD!"

The EMTs started to take him away. Sheppard was now more confused than before, but he thought it would be better to have as much firepower available as possible. He ran back to the gurney and grabbed Ronon's gun, as well as two additional power cells.

"Teyla," he said to her, "go with him. Take care of him, and have

yourself been taken care of too." He pressed the button on his radio. "Sam, if we're to get out of here, I'm afraid I'm going to have to go back there."

"I was thinking the same thing,"_ was the response. _"It will take us about ten minutes to have the ZPM properly installed. You think you can hold the control room for that long?"_

Suddenly, John became aware of the howling outside the facility. It gave him gooseflesh. "I'll do my best. Beam me there."

* * *

><p>Unknown Forerunner structure

Installation 00, designate "The Ark"

0030 hrs. October 8, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Palmer, clad in full GEN-2 MJOLNIR, raised her fist, signaling Fireteam Hammer to stop. She'd heard something further inside.

Just a while ago, they had arrived at the location where Major Sullivan had supposedly fled to. The Pelican he had commandeered was there, confirming the captain's suspicions. It was resting less than 20 feet from the entrance to a large structure, similar to the Librarian's shrine back in Requiem.

Now, as they advanced, she could definitely hear something. She signaled Hammer to keep moving as silent as possible. A couple of moments later, a friendly IFF signal appeared in the edge of her motion tracker. It had to be Sullivan.

Then she heard his voice in the distance. _"I'm sorry I'm late. Lasky wouldn't allow me to get out of the ship. I had to improvise."_

"That was not wise." It was a female's voice. A familiar one. _"Someone might be here shortly."_

_"I warned Lasky not to send anyone after m__â€"__"_"

"And you thought he'd do as you said. We're going to have to do this quick. Did you bring it?"

_ "I did."_ Sullivan answered.

The voices were growing stronger as the Spartans advanced. Palmer knew they were close, so she kept moving forward towards a corner.

"What about the others? Did you bring them?"

"I did. They're on the ship."

"I want to see them."

"That'll have to wait."

"That's not what we agreed to."

_"Hey, cut me some slack here. I barely managed to leave the ship. Besides, you are still to prove your trustworthiness before__â€"__"

"Trustworthiness? I was the one who gave you the information you needed to find the Ark!"

"And we almost got ourselves killed twice upon our arrival in less than five minutes!"

_"Don't give me that. We both know that even a dozen cruisers would not have been able to stand against the _Infinity_. And Roland is a very capable AI. He could maneuver that ship as if it were a corvette."_

_"You will see them when _I_ deem it appropriate."_

Palmer finally was able to peek inside the room from which the voices came. It was a large, circular hall with at least two dozen weird-looking rings covering the walls. Sullivan was indeed talking to a woman in the center of the room. Her suspicions were confirmed when she saw the woman: she had lost her left arm. She gave a final instruction to the Spartans, and they all stormed into the room, weapons at the ready.

"Don't move!" she shouted. Fireteam Hammer took positions surrounding the two inside the room.

"Wait, don't shoot!" Sullivan took a position between Palmer and the woman.

"Sullivan, move. This woman is a traitor."

"She's not a traitor. She's working for us."

Palmer was taken aback by this statement. "What?"

"Trust me," Sullivan said. "She's on our side."

Palmer was not willing to let her guard down. She knew Catherine Halsey just enough to keep her M6H guns aimed at her.

"Please, Miss Palmer," Halsey said, "lower your weapons." But Palmer didn't comply.

"Commander Palmer," Sullivan said, "there's no need for this. If you justâ€" He stopped talking when she pointed one of her guns at him.

"You're not talking unless I say so," she said. Then to Halsey, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Halsey was entirely calm, unmoved. She seemed genuinely fearless, as if she were untouchable. "I'm just doing my job."

"And what would that be?"

"Why don't you ask Major Sullivan here?" Halsey replied.

Palmer turned to Sullivan. "Explain."

Sullivan took a deep breath. "Halsey contacted us a few months ago, claiming she had been able to collect some valuable information. We didn't trust her at first, but then we were able to confirm the reliability of her intel. She told us the Covenant were trusting her so far, which gave her a unique opportunity to help the UNSC as a double agent. She's been feeding us more intel ever since."

"None of you have answered my question yet. What. Is. She. Doing. Here?"

"Both of us were to rendezvous here at the Ark by orders from ONI. I don't need to explain anything else."

Palmer remembered what she'd just heard before entering the room. "You don't trust her. Do you?" Sullivan didn't answer. "You wouldn't place your full confidence in her, which is why you didn't even tell Captain Lasky about this. You know you can't trust her." He remained silent.

"I'm sorry, major," Halsey said and started to walk closer to him. Palmer followed her with her gun. "We both know she's right. You just admitted so. Which is a shame, really, because I was just hoping the UNSC would prove me wrong for once."

Suddenly, Sullivan fell to the ground. It had looked as if he'd received some sort of electrical shock, but it had come from nowhere. Halsey had not made a single move, but Palmer didn't care; it had to have been her. She aimed at Halsey's leg, and shot.

But it had no effect whatsoever.

She shot Halsey again, aiming at her chest this time. The doctor's lab coat shimmered for a second. Halsey made a smile.

And before Palmer could even notice, every member of Fireteam Hammer was on the ground; they had all been impaled with energy swords. Several Elites de-cloaked all around her, including the executioners of her Spartans. She had beaten worse odds in the past, even before becoming a Spartan, so she was ready to fight until each and all of these hinge-heads was on the ground like her people.

Then, she saw an energy sword igniting right in front of her, by Halsey's side. She fired her guns repeatedly at Halsey's left, where the stealth Elite had to be. But as Halsey drew closer to her, she realized

She felt a burning pain as the plasma blade cut through her left shoulder and saw her limb falling to the floor. She dropped to her knees, shuddering all over. Her body was about to go into shock, but her mind was not willing to give up as of yet. Then another, smaller blade penetrated her left lung. She looked up to see Halsey kneeling by her. The lab coat was gone, a full-body armor taking its place. The smaller blade was coming from Halsey's right fist, while she held the sword in a left, robotic hand.

"Now we're even," Halsey whispered to her ear. She was becoming a blur; her vision was being clouded, everything was fading away. She tried to fight it, but in the end, her strength left her, and she

gave up to the darkness that befell her.

* * *

><p>Inside Ancient facility on M9R-748, Pegasus galaxy

USS George Hammond

1745 hrs. August 3, 2013

"Sam, they've breached the hangar! We've got to leave now!"

The piercing howling of the creatures became stronger as they stormed into the facility. "Hang on, Sheppard," Sam answered. "Just a few more seconds."

She pressed the comms button in her chair. "_Daedalus_, what's your status?" There was no response. "_Daedalus_, come in, please." Static.

By now, Sam was feeling very concerned. Installing the ZPM had taken a few minutes longer than she'd originally thought, and she feared that by now it was already too late for the _Daedalus_. That Wraith cruiser was by far more advanced than any other Wraith ship they'd ever encountered, including the ZPM-powered Hive ship they'd fought four years before—which was odd because, to the best of her knowledge, the energy readings coming from the cruiser were nowhere near close to those given off by a ZPM.

She received a call from Engineering. "_Colonel, ZPM is installed and operating at 100 percent capacity."_

"Understood," she replied. She contacted John. "Sheppard, we're good to go. Open the roof."

She heard explosions and gunfire outside of the ship; the claymores Sheppard had placed around the control room must have gone off. "_Understood! Just give me a second!"_

Well over a second passed before the roof started to retract. "Well done, Sheppard," Sam said. "We're beaming you aboard now."

"Negative! Those things could get their hands on the controls and close the roof on you! Get out of the hangar first!" The gunfire stopped. "_I just closed the bulkhead,"_ Sheppard said, catching his breath, "_but I don't think that'll stop them for long. They're too many."_

Earlier, when the _Hammond_ had picked up the locator beacons' signals of the people trapped inside the control room the second the bulkhead door had been opened, Sam had theorized that, somehow, once the control room was sealed tight, it blocked those signals. For that reason, she'd agreed with Sheppard to close the bulkhead only if the situation became truly desperate.

"Could you still open it once we're out?" Sam asked.

_"Not a chance. But I've got another idea. I'm going to try and blast

a hole in the roof."_ The sound of Ronon's gun firing came back through the radio signal. _"This is going to take me a while. Get out of here! I'll be fine."_

Sam hesitated for a moment, but she finally gave the _go_ signal. The ship began to rise, and in just a few seconds, they were out of the facility.

"Try to beam Sheppard out now," she ordered. But nothing happened. She knew the _Hammond_ would have to raise its shields once they engaged the cruiser again, but doing so would mean leaving Sheppard hanging out to dry. Still, they had no other choice.

"Sheppard, if you can hear me, hang in there just a little longer." There was no response.

As they reached the upper atmosphere, the cruiser came again into view. The _Daedalus_ was nowhere to be seen, but neither were there any debris. The cruiser opened fire on the _Hammond_, and once again, the shield held the incoming shots.

"Shields are down to 99 percent," the weapons officer reported. Sam felt more confident hearing this. The shield had taken the exact same amount of enemy fire than the first time.

"Main batteries, return fire," she ordered. This time, two Asgard beams hit the cruiser. Its shields flickered, and then they finally failed.

In that moment, the _Daedalus_ came out of hyperspace and fired upon the now unshielded cruiser, damaging its engines. Sam immediately hailed the ship. "_Daedalus_, it's good to see you're still around."

"Sorry if we worried you. Our shields were almost depleted. We were forced to take a hit-and-run approach. Otherwise, you would have found only our toasted remains floating in space."

"Well, the cruiser is now a sitting duck. I don't think you mind helping us finish the job."

"With pleasure," Caldwell said. And both ships fired upon the cruiser once again.

But even with the ZPM powering the Asgard weapons, the cruiser was still resisting most of the incoming fire. It took several shots, but finally one of them got through, possibly hitting some critical system, and the Wraith ship exploded in a massive fireball—quite bigger than usual, in fact.

Now that the space over the planet was again clear, Sam ordered the shields lowered; John was still down there. "Sheppard, this is _Hammond_, come in." There was no response. "Sheppard, this is _Hammond_, please respond."

This time, the response was almost immediate. _"Try it now!"_

Sam gave the order, and a bright light illuminated the bridge. When it dissipated, Sheppard was kneeling in front of them, arms covering his head, as if protecting himself from an incoming attack.

"Relax, John," Sam said. "You're safe now."

Sheppard moved his arms to his sides, turned to see Sam, and exhaled. "Nice timing."

"Good job, Sheppard," Sam said while pressing her comm. "_Daedalus_, we have the survivors from the attack and the ZPMs. We're sending you one now."

"Thank you, Colonel. We'll definitely need it if we encounter another ship like that."

"Better another cruiser than a Hive ship. You know, I noticed the hull was somewhat more resilient now than before."

"Yeah, we noticed that too. Any ideas?"

"Not yet," Sam said, going over the data from the scans. "The energy output was high, but it didn't match that of a ZPM. It was more likeâ€"

"Like what?"

Sam had to double-check the data. It was impossible, but there was no other explanation. "It's consistent to the output given off by a fusion reactor."

"What? How?"

"I'm not sure," Sam answered. "But I'm afraid there's only one place where we'll find the answer to that." She turned to see Sheppard, knowing he would be feeling the same way she was about that decision.

* * *

><p>Location unknown; presumably somewhere in the Ark

Date and time unknown; presumably October 8, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"Commander Palmer? Commander Palmer, do you hear me?"

The voice was a man's. It sounded distant, almost incorporeal. When she opened her eyes, all she could see was white, a blur. Her body felt weightless, incomplete. Had she died and gone into some sort of afterlife?

It took several moments for her Spartan senses to kick in. Suddenly, she was fully awake, eyes wide-open, and she rememberedâ€|

She looked to her left side. Her arm was indeed gone. But why was she able to breathe without pain? She had a clear image of Halsey putting an energy dagger right through her chest. Had it been an invention of her agonizing mind? For that matter, why was she still alive?

She managed to sit upright and found herself in a Covenant holding cell, an energy shield guarding the entrance. A small corridor

separated another row of cells from her own. They were in a brig, probably aboard a ship.

Major Sullivan was being held in a cell right in front of hers. "Thank God, commander," he said. "I was wondering if you'd ever wake up."

She had regained enough strength to answer him. "Save it. I'm only in this position because of you."

"Look, commander, I know you have reason to be mad at me, butâ€"

"Oh, why would I? I just lost four of my Spartans, not to mention my _arm_, because of your need to meet with that viper!"

"I've already told you, I was here under instructions from ONI."

"And you never told me what those instructions were."

"I'm not in any liberty toâ€"

"We're prisoners because of your orders! I'd say that confidentiality no longer applies under these circumstances."

Sullivan seemed to think it over for several minutes, during which Palmer started to make an assessment of their current condition. Except for her skinsuit, her armor was gone, which meant no way of communicating with the _Infinity_, let alone to attempt a breakout right away. She'd lost a limb and, since the severed veins and arteries had been cauterized, blood should have accumulated in the wound, causing internal bleeding. However, she was feeling just fine, as if such a thing hadn't actually happened. Given enough time, she would recover all of her strength. Even without her armor, eventually she would be able to find a way out. The only thing she'd have to figure out was, how?

"Information," Sullivan said.

This snapped Palmer out of her thoughts. "What?"

"That had been our first agreement. We would both exchange information."

Palmer was confused, but at least Sullivan was starting to come clean now. Perhaps she had made a point. "What kind of information?"

"She would give us intel on enemy deployment, findings, and research. In return, we would give her everything we had on the Forerunners history."

"History? Why?"

"That I sincerely don't know. I guess knowledge is power, and she would need a lot of that if she was to keep any sort of leverage among the Covenant."

It made sense. Back on Requiem, Halsey had admitted she desperately wanted to know _everything_ when she'd been placed into custody. But

there had to be something else to it. "You said that was your first agreement. Was there a second?"

"Yes," Sullivan said. "She knew we had one half of what she called the 'Janus key', and we suspected she'd kept the other half."

"The 'Janus key'â€|" Palmer repeated. "Is that the name of the Forerunner artifact recovered just before the Covenant sent Requiem into oblivion?"

"Yes. She claimed to be the only one who knew how it worked, but that she needed both halves of the artifact to make it work. ONI had spent several months trying to make it work, to no avail. They finally had to admit that Halsey had been the one to find the artifact, so it could be possible she was telling the truth."

"But you wouldn't just give her away the artifact. Which is why they sent you to confirm her claim."

"And the _Infinity_ as backup. In case something went wrong."

"So, our mission to recover some old alien artifacts was just a cover."

"Not entirely. You saw those artifacts yourself."

What? Before leaving Earth, Lasky had informed the _Infinity_'s crew about their mission, but he hadn't been entirely clear on what they would be looking for specifically. Palmer tried to mentally retrace her steps from when she'd walked into the structure looking for the major, and then it hit her. "The rings?"

"Exactly. Now, Halsey has a bigger grasp of Forerunner technology, which in the end helped her in her own research on the artifact."

"What do you mean?"

"According to her, the key provides the real-time location of every single piece of Forerunner technology in the galaxy. Apparently, she had a stroke of luck with her half and was able to extrapolate a single set of coordinates in space leading to a Forerunner installation."

"The Ark," Palmer said.

"The Ark," Sullivan confirmed. "As for us at ONI, we had discovered a Forerunner record telling of the very same devices we came here looking for. It also mentioned where they had been stowed away, but it didn't include the exact coordinates."

"Soâ€| each had something the other needed, and one of you offered an exchange."

"Sort of. We never told Halsey about our discovery."

Palmer frowned. "Then what did you offer her?"

Sullivan was about to answer her, when they both heard a door opening and footsteps walking into the brig. It was Halsey. She was wearing

armor similar in design to the one Sangheili Rangers sportedâ€”full-body skinsuit with only a few pieces of armor plating and an EVA helmetâ€”, yet quite different. Her left arm had been replaced with a prosthetic one, the likes of which Palmer had never seen before. The robotic hand had only four digits; two middle fingers, and two opposing digits, just like an Elite's.

So, not an invention of my agonizing mind, Palmer thought.

Halsey turned to look Palmer in the eyes. "Do you like it?" she said, moving her prosthetic arm. She must have noticed Palmer's wonder in her eyes. "I designed and built it myself. Of course, the tricky part was acquiring the medical equipment necessary to fuse it with my body. Still, I can't complain. The hand has turned out to be quite useful, especially when wielding Covenant weapons." She lowered her arm, tapped her leg armor plate with it, and her entire body shimmered. _Energy shields. That explains why not even one of my shots hurt her._

"I also designed this armor. Well, it was more of a redesigning based on the equipment used by the Elites, but I did build it from scratch, incorporating a few minor improvements. You know, it's amazing to see what our own hologram technology is capable of. You only need to tweak a module designed for MJOLNIR armor just a bit, and _voilÃ _." Halsey made a small movement with her left "fingers", and her armor was replaced by the lab outfit in which Palmer had seen her before. The prosthetic arm was gone. Then it all switched back to Halsey's true outfit.

"You should feel lucky I kept the medical equipment on board," she said, "including the flash-cloning equipment. You could've been dead by now."

Palmer's gaze was surely reflecting the rage she felt for this woman, but these words made her soften her stare just a little. Halsey had treated her wounds? The very wounds _she_ had caused? Why? Why kill Fireteam Hammer and leave her alive?

"As for your arm," Halsey continued, "I've already seen another Spartan before with a nice prosthetic arm, so I'm sure the UNSC will provide something good for you. That is, of course, if you are ever rescued." She then turned to see Sullivan. "And as for you, I should have killed you for betraying me. But you did bring me the second half of the key. And you might still be of some use to me."

She motioned to the end of the corridor, and the shield in Sullivan's cell disappeared. Two Elites walked into the cell, grabbed Sullivan, and brought him before Halsey. _OK, there's a hinge-head in charge of the brig. And these two are possibly standing guard outside._

Halsey pressed a button in her prosthetic arm, and a small section of it slid open. She reached into it and produced both halves of the Forerunner key. She handed both of them to Sullivan. "Go on, try it. Put the pieces together."

Sullivan took both pieces and tried to do as Halsey said. After several tries, he gave up and handed them back to Halsey, who took one on each hand, and in a single movement turned them into one. There was a bright light, and the brig became filled with several holograms depicting star systems. "You see now?"

"What did you do to it?" Sullivan asked.

"It's not what I did. It's what the Librarian did. I'm not just the only one who knows how to use this key; I'm also the only one who can use it."

"You can't be serious," Palmer thought out loud.

Halsey separated the key and placed both halves back inside her arm. The holograms disappeared. "I am. And if you had rescued me instead of trying to kill me, I would have helped the UNSC acquire everything the Forerunners left behind for us. But nowâ€|"

She motioned with her head, and the Elites holding Sullivan threw him back inside his cell. The shield was activated again.

"Do you really think we're just going to let you get away with this?" Palmer said. "There will be people looking for us. They will find us, and then they will take care of you."

Halsey turned to see her again. "Don't be so sure about that. This corvette is equipped with active camouflage, one I developed specifically for this kind of ships. Not even the Infinity's sensors would pick it up. But still," and she turned to see Sullivan again, "I do hope they will send someone to look for you."

Palmer also diverted her gaze from Halsey to Sullivan. "What is she talking about?"

"Major, why don't you tell the commander here about the little agreement you made? The one you failed to keep up to?"

Sullivan looked down, as if ashamed. "In exchange for the coordinates leading to the Ark and assistance to operate the key, we offered herâ€| to see her Spartans."

It all came to Palmer in a flash. Did you bring them? â€| I want to see themâ€|

"There are SPARTAN-IIs on board the Infinity?" she asked.

"Yes," Sullivan admitted.

Palmer addressed Halsey again. "What could you possibly want with 'your' Spartans?"

"To save them," Halsey answered.

"Save them? How could they be safe with you?"

"You still don't get it, do you? Humanity was destined to inherit a Mantle of Responsibility for all living things, a Mantle left behind for us by the Forerunners. They believed we were worthy of looking over every single being in this galaxy. But how can we hope to protect life when we're bent on destroying it? How can we think we can bring peace to the galaxy when we keep fighting among ourselves? No, our race is not worthy of such responsibility, not yet.

"But soon, all that will change. Once we acquire all the treasures

the Forerunners left behind for us, we shall use them to bring a cleansing fire upon every world known to us, and those found with fault shall perish in the flames of everlasting wisdom and justice. Only those found worthy will be given a chance to begin anew. I saved you so that you may witness what you brought upon yourselves, yet when the time comes, you will surely be among those who will burn and perish."

"But you and your Spartans will be among those worthy to be saved," Palmer concluded. Halsey only grinned. "My, you are such a piece of work. I can't say I'm surprised to hear you speak the same way these religious lunatics do. Still, lying to both humans and Covenant alike must be quite difficult."

"Oh, but I'm not lying to the Elites. They know everything about this. Hell, they even support it."

"You can't be serious."

"You'd be surprised. Many among the Sangheili have admired our race even since the final years of the war. And now that their false prophets are gone, they have accepted the fact that the Forerunners chose us as their rightful heirs. But they also know we're not perfect, and they are willing to see this cleansing through. For while we are reborn, they will take upon themselves the Mantle, guarding it until we're ready to take our place in this galaxy."

"You know the Spartans won't fall for this."

"They will come to see the truth. And even if they don'tâ€" Halsey was cut midsentence when one of the Elites suddenly approached her and spoke to her ear in Sangheili, almost in a whisper. She responded with the same tone, also in Sangheili. Then, without another word, both she and the Elite walked away, and the sound of the brig's door closing echoed through the corridor.

"That kind of makes me wish I still had my helmet on," Palmer thought out loud. "The built-in translating program would have helped a lot there."

"Well, you have me," Sullivan said.

"Yeah, like you knew how to speak Sangheili."

"As a matter of fact, I do have a small grasp of the language."

"Is that so?" Palmer said sarcastically. "What did they say?"

"The one that just came in said something about the 'rings of life'. Halsey asked if the troops down there were already in position."

"What do you think it means?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Sullivan answered, "but I think one of the rings we found just activated."

* * *

><p>Gate room

****Atlantis, Earth****

****1300 hrs. August 4, 2013****

"You know," Cameron Mitchell said, "when Sam took command of Atlantis and we all parted ways, I never thought there could possibly be anything else that would bring us together just one more time. Not after what we'd been through with the Ori, anyways."

"Indeed, Colonel Mitchell," Teal'c replied.

Daniel smiled at this comments. Bringing SG-1 back together eight years ago had been quite a task for Mitchell, but he had succeeded, and the team had remained together for almost three more years. However, after the mission to the Ori home galaxy, Mitchell had been offered permanent command of the Odyssey, which would have meant fractioning the team yet again. At first he had rejected it; then, Sam had been reassigned to Pegasus, and Teal'c had been asked to return to Chulak, which was still in ruins, even though the Jaffa had managed to rebuild after the Ori's attack. So finally, Mitchell had accepted.

When the last Ba'al clone had been captured and the Tok'ra had invited SG-1, including Jack, to the extraction ceremony, they had realized that there was no longer a need for them to be together, but also that they had become a symbol of hope in the galaxy. Therefore, they had all agreed to take separate ways and keep contributing to Earth's common cause, but if something ever came up that could be of consequence to all humanity, they would come together once more and face it.

And here they were, united again, ready to begin another adventure.

Well, Daniel thought, almost all of us.

Vala had completely resigned the SGC to take on a civilian life with the former host of Ba'al, and Jack was now head of Homeworld Command. Of course, he had come to Atlantis to supervise their mission, but he would not be joining them on the field trip. Sam was currently on her mission in Pegasus with Sheppard, but she would surely join them once it was over. McKay had been appointed to replace her until then; for the moment, he would have to do.

"So, Daniel," Mitchell said, "are you expecting to find Furlings on the other side?"

"I'm not sure yet of what we'll find," Daniel answered, "but I do hope it's something big."

"As long as it's not life-sucking aliens," McKay muttered.

"We're not going to find life-sucking aliens on the other side, Rodney. I've already told you."

"And you're certain of this becauseâ€|"

"It doesn't matter. What's important is to find out if there is a

race out there that we haven't encountered yet, people who could potentially become our allies."

McKay didn't say another word. Mitchell looked up and nodded to Jack, who in turn gave the instruction to dial the Gate. Once again, the process was slow due to the need to use McKay's dialing program. Daniel began to feel the excitement of stepping through the Gate once more, knowing there was a lot at stake in their mission.

"Remember," Jack said on the radio, "if you don't find a way to dial back, Sam will pick you up after they've brought back the ZPMs. Please, spare her the trip."

"Don't worry, sir," Mitchell said. "We'll find our way back before they need to do that."

The Gate activated, and Jack spoke again on the radio. "SG-1, you have a go."

"Thanks, Jack," Daniel replied. And the team crossed the event horizon that would take them to the unknown.

* * *

><p>When Daniel reached the other side, he couldn't help but to be amazed. He had seen the images recorded by the MALP, but to see it with his own eyesâ€¦ It was like nothing he had ever seen before. Not even the few Furling structures found in the Milky Way could compare to this, which suggested this had been built in the Furlings heyday. The Stargates lining the walls somehow added even more magnificence to this room.<p>

"Alright," Mitchell said, "first things first. Let's find our ticket home, thenâ€¦" He paused; Teal'c had signaled them to stop.

"We are not alone," he said.

Those words made everyone start looking to every direction, when suddenly, out of nowhere, a large number of what Daniel could only describe as saurian-like beings clad in armor materialized all around them. Both his team and the creatures raised their weapons.

"Well," Daniel said, "this could be a problem."

"You think?" McKay replied.

* * *

><p>AN: I just realized something. I've forgotten to mention the fact that, though this is listed as a HaloxSGA crossover, I intended from the very beginning to include SG-1 in the story. Anyway, now you know :).**

5. Chapter 5: Unexpected Visitors

**A/N: I'm back! I know it's been three weeks, but honestly, I had a hard time trying to make this. My brain was left dry after the exams :S. Still, I hope this chapter will be worth the wait for

you.**

Enjoy!

* * *

><p>Location unknown, presumably somewhere in the Andromeda galaxy

1310 hrs. August 4, 2013

For several minutes, no one dared move a muscle. The saurian creatures seemed to be expecting SG-1 to make the first move, or perhaps they were awaiting orders to attack. Either way, judging by the outfit and the weapons, Daniel had no doubt these were part of a race both intelligent and advanced. He took advantage of those minutes to carefully observe their characteristics: over two meters tall, reptilian skin, four-digit hands, and of course the rather odd jaws. He wondered if they had the ability to speak in a structured language he would be able to understand or at least identify, or if their communication was based only on growl-like sounds.

He knew there was only one way to find out.

"Listen," he said, "we don't mean you any harm. We're just peaceful explorers from another galaxy." The creatures didn't budge. "Cam, maybe we should lower our weapons to prove what I just said."

"I don't think so, Daniel," Mitchell replied. "These guys keep looking at us like we were dinner."

Daniel knew he was right, but they had to try something. "Look, we've come from a planet far away called Earth with the sole purpose of

This statement triggered an unexpected reaction among the creatures. He could hear some of them whispering, and Daniel was able to hear actual words, even though he didn't understand them. But when the creatures gripped their weapons more tightly and started growling menacingly, Daniel realized he'd said something that had upset them big time.

"They do not appear to have been delighted by your words, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c said. "In fact, I believe it only made them more aggressive towards us."

"They know about Earth," Daniel thought out loud.

"Uh, I don't think they've heard nice things about it," McKay said.

"You are right about that," said an apparently human voice, a woman's, originating from somewhere further down the hall. Both Mitchell and Teal'c trained the weapons at that spot. The same voice then spoke a few words in another language, and the creatures surrounding SG-1 lowered their weapons just a little. Mitchell and Teal'c, however, remained in the same position.

Then Daniel saw an old lady, definitely human, coming out of the shadows and walking into the hall. She was wearing a lab coat, or at

least he assumed it was a lab coat. Her left arm was missing, and the coat sleeve was tied in a knot at shoulder's height. She had a weary appearance, but at the same time, she looked inspired and determined.

"They have reason to distrust of anyone claiming to come from Earth, and so do I," the old lady said, resuming her initial statement. Her gaze became as menacing as that of the creatures around them. "Who are you, and why did you come here?"

Daniel now feared anything he'd say would just get them into more trouble. He was reminded of the time when he and Vala turned up at the Ori home galaxy, causing the series of events which culminated in the Ori crusade to the Milky Way. And yet, he now needed to know what these people had heard about Earth that could have made them so hostile towards its inhabitants. Moreover, he had to know how they'd learned about Earth in the first place.

"I am Dr. Daniel Jackson," he began with a slightly shaky voice. "These are Colonel Cameron Mitchell, Dr. Rodney McKay, and Teal'c. We are members of a team called SG-1. We came here from our galaxy with the purpose of finding any available traces of an ancient race known as the Precursors."

"Your galaxy?" the woman asked, her voice becoming more menacing, as if angered by the use of that pronoun. "What kind of authority do the UNSC think they have to say this galaxy is theirs?"

UNSC? This galaxy? They were still in the Milky Way? Had he misinterpreted the information in the database? No, he had double-checked and even triple-checked the coordinates and the Ancients account of their encounter with the Precursors. He had no doubt they had traveled to another galaxy—the Andromeda galaxy, to be precise.

But why a nine-chevron address? He had wondered about that ever since he had found it. Why not an eight-chevron address? He recalled reading a few of the theories revolving around the ninth chevron prior to its first activation; specifically, he remembered two: time travel and jumping between realities. Perhaps this was the case. Perhaps they had traveled to another reality, or to a different year.

Maybe even to a combination of both.

Daniel quickly thought of a couple of questions which would confirm his theory. "What year is it?"

He was hoping his dubious face seemed genuine, for he truly didn't understand what was going on. Apparently, it did. The old woman actually tilted her head with this question and took a while before answering, "2558."

OK, we're in the future. "What has become of the United States Air Force?"

The woman took several seconds this time to answer, like she was searching thoroughly in his face and those of his companions for anything that might give them away as liars. She finally spoke. "You really don't know?"

Daniel and McKay shook their heads. The other two still didn't move. The woman spoke again in the alien language she'd used before, and the saurian creatures disappeared the same way they'd appeared. It was only for a few seconds, though, as in a flash their P-90s were gone, taken from them by an invisible force. Then the aliens reappeared, weapons trained at them once again, but now closer than before. Way closer.

"You will be taken to a holding cell until I decide what to do with you," the mysterious woman said. "The Sangheili are a fierce, cunning, warrior race. You wouldn't last more than ten seconds against them if you try anything stupid. I suggest you cooperate."

All members of SG-1 looked at each other. They knew they had no choice now, and things could've been worse at this point. Mitchell turned to the lady. "Lead the way."

A few of the Sangheili—as the old lady had called the saurian creatures—escorted them out of the room, through a long hallway, and to the sunlight. The old woman and the rest of the aliens followed behind.

And when Daniel looked to the sky, he became lost for words entirely. He, along with the rest of SG-1, was standing in some sort of artificial world—for lack of a better term—looking at a galaxy very much like the Milky Way.

"This is new," Mitchell said.

* * *

><p>In orbit above Wraith homeworld, Pegasus galaxy

USS George Hammond

1330 hrs. August 4, 2013

Three years ago, Sheppard had found it hard to believe that the Wraith were finally gone. Now, he was having a hard time believing they were back, and stronger than ever.

When the _Daedalus_ had returned from Pegasus three years ago with intel suggesting the Wraith had retreated back to their homeworld—the same world where Sheppard had almost died "eaten" by an Iratus bug—, everyone became worried. For all they knew, the Wraith could be forging a new alliance between all the different warring factions, planning their next move against the galaxy or even Earth.

The IOA, knowing this was a unique opportunity, had decided to act on this intel as quickly as possible. They had sent the _Odyssey_, the only _Daedalus_-class ship with cloaking capabilities, to obliterate the Wraith while they were all in one place. The plan had been to fly into the Wraith-controlled system undetected and deploy several Horizon Weapons Platforms similar to the one the _Apollo_ had used on their preemptive strike against the Asurans years before.

However, when the _Odyssey_ had arrived, they had made a haunting discovery.

There was not even one ship in orbit. Every single Hive ship, cruiser, scout ship, and even the Darts were all landed on the planet's surface. But the view had changed. The clouds were now greenish instead of white, and when the ship had scanned the planet searching for life signs, they had found noneâ€"not even one. Telemetry from a second scan had showed a complete absence of a life-sustaining atmosphere.

Since Atlantis had returned to Earth, each _Daedalus_-class ship had received two Puddle Jumpers for covert recon operations. Colonel Mitchell, the new commander of the _Odyssey_, had sent both its Jumpers down to the surface to get a better idea of what was happening there. John remembered seeing the footage of both ships and getting a nasty feeling all over his body.

The surface was covered in foul, fungus-like growths, and the air was filled withâ€| spores of an unknown kind. The Wraith ships themselves seemed to be producing them, so the Jumper pilots had decided to break into one of the ships through its fighter bay to find the exact source of the spores. Instead, they had found the Hive to be decaying, breaking apart, as if infected by leprosyâ€"if such a thing was possible.

Coming out of the Jumper to explore the Hive on foot was out of the question because of the lack of a breathable atmosphere, but even from inside the small ship it was quite obvious the Wraith had been attacked. There were hundreds of bodies littered throughout the bay, some of which looked like something had scrambled the insides, and though it seemed like the Wraith had put a hell of a fight, in the end, they had been defeated. And yet, there were no enemy corpses anywhere.

So, whoâ€"or whatâ€"had slaughtered the Wraith?

Based on whatever little information Mitchell and his crew had been able to collect under the safest conditions possible, the eggheads at Homeworld Security had theorized that the Wraith had been attacked with some sort of bio-weapon which had caused them to go crazy and die in an apparently gruesome way. The IOA and Homeworld Security had ordered the system off-limits and the Spacegate removed from the planet's orbit, just in case it was something other than a bio-weapon.

That had been three years ago, and since then, both the _Daedalus_ and the _Apollo_ had made regular recon flybys over the planet to make sure the menace was still dormant and contained. As time had passed, however, seeing as how there had been no visible changes on the planet, the recon missions had become less frequent.

Today, looking through the viewport of the _Hammond_'s bridge, Sheppard wished those missions had continued on the same regular basis as on the beginning. Both his eyes and the surface scans were confirming what they all had feared since their skirmish with the Wraith cruiser.

The planet was empty.

"Sam," Sheppard said, "how many ships were on the surface?"

"According to the reports," Sam answered, "thirty-five Hive ships and well over a hundred cruisers."

"And now they're all back out there," Sheppard said matter-of-factly, "_and_ apparently now they're also spreading something that causes some sort of mutation on their victims and turns them into aggressive, mindless beasts. How did we let this happen?" The question floated in the air for several moments before he spoke again. "We should have launched those Horizons when we had the chance. None of this would be happening now."

"Sheppard, we both know we needed to understand what had happened to the Wraith before we destroyed all evidence of what could be a new threat in this galaxy."

"Well, now the threat is spreading all over Pegasus," Sheppard said, "because of us! Because of our indecision to act swiftly!"

"There was no way of knowing this wouldâ€" "

"Colonel Carter," a voice on Sam's comm interrupted her. It was Dr. Zelenka.

"Go ahead, Doctor," she answered after a couple of seconds.

"I think I've got something you'd like to see."

"Roger that, I'm on my way," Sam said. "Sheppard, are you coming?"

"Yeah," he answered. Both of them walked out of the bridge and headed for the Asgard Core room. Dr. Radek Zelenka, as well as a few other scientists who had been stationed on the Pegasus Forward Base, had been reassigned to the _Hammond_ right after the Wraith attack on M9R-748 the day before. The rest of the base staff had been taken aboard the _Daedalus_, which was now on its way back to Earth until a proper threat assessment was made. He was now going over the data from previous surface scans, as well as from the scan made just ten minutes ago, in the hope of finding something they'd lost before.

"What did you find, Doctor?" Sam asked when they arrived.

Zelenka beckoned them to one of the screens. "This," he said, pointing to a section of the surface where a Wraith Hive was clearly visible, "has been present in all scans until now."

"I assume it's no longer there in our scan," Sheppard said sarcastically.

"Obviously," Zelenka said, somewhat offended, "but there's also a large rift behind it, extending for a few kilometers beyond the Hive. We thought it was a natural occurrence in the surface, maybe a dried riverbed. Now look at this." He pointed to a small formation located inside the gap at the forward section of the hull. "We had theorized this was part of the Hive and that it had fallen off as a result of decay or rough landing."

"And it's not," Sam said, more a question than a statement.

"It's not," Zelenka said, pressing some buttons on the keyboard. Another image popped up on the screen. "This image is from our scan."

There was a large crater where the Hive used to be, and the odd formation had remained there. Zelenka zoomed the image in. "Do you see it?"

Sheppard had to focus really hard before he could make out a bulbous shape, almost symmetrical and definitely artificial in nature—but not of Wraith origin. "What is that?"

"A ship," Zelenka said.

"A ship?" Sam asked, wonder in her face.

"The rift I showed you before? It's a perfect straight line, which is something impossible to happen naturally. If my calculations are correct, it ends exactly where this object is located, or at least it did before the Hive ship landed."

"It's a crash mark," Sam said, apparently understanding where Zelenka was going with all this.

"Yes. The object is roughly 300 meters large, and it looks like it had sustained some battle damage before landing here."

"You mean crashing, Doc," Sheppard said. "I don't think I've seen something like this ever before. Are we dealing with a new race or something like that? Because I haven't seen anything like this before."

"I don't think any of us has," Zelenka said, "but the fact is that we've been in this galaxy for over seven years. By now, we should have already met whoever built this."

"Excuse me, Radek," Sam said, "are you telling us what I think you're telling us?"

Zelenka shrugged. "I don't think this ship was built anywhere in _this_ galaxy."

"Then where did it come from?" Sam wondered out loud.

Sheppard suddenly thought of something. "Didn't we keep a couple of the MALPs from the Forward Base?"

"I think so," Sam replied. "Why?"

"Is there a way we could beam there down there? Right inside of that ship?"

* * *

><p>Location unknown

Local date and time unknown

****Approximately 1400 hrs. Atlantis Time, August 4, 2013****

"So, now what?" McKay asked. "You plan to talk our way out of this, Daniel? Because I don't think these people are as reasonable and nice as they seem to be."

"Rodney, don't complain," Daniel replied. "It could've been worse."

"How? How could it have been any worse?"

"We could be dead," Daniel said. This gave McKay pause.

"We've come out of really worse situations before," Mitchell said. "There's no reason to panic yet."

He was right. So far, after exiting the underground complex housing the Stargates, they had only been taken aboard a small transport ship via some sort of gravity lifting system, and then flown all the way to a massive plateau. Daniel had been able to assert as much only because the sides of the ship had remained open for the entire duration of the trip—not a long one, anyway. Suddenly, in just the blink of an eye, they had found themselves into a hangar bay which had come out of nowhere. Daniel's first thought was this place was cloaked or even out of phase with their dimension. After all those years in the SGC, he had learned to consider even the wildest possibilities.

Once they had come out of the alien craft—in the same way as they had entered—their escort had walked them through a corridor and into a brig with force field-secured cells. They had been taken into a separate cell each, close enough at least to allow them to talk to each other. Two guards remained inside for a while, and only a while ago had they left.

"OK, here's what I think so far," Daniel said. "We dialed a nine-chevron address, which created a wormhole that took us into the future, and possibly, into another reality as well."

McKay shot him a double-take. "How could you possibly know that?" His voice, instead of reflecting sarcasm as usual, carried curiosity in it.

"When I ask the old woman which year was it and what had happened to the Air Force, she seemed somewhat intrigued. You'd think this far into the future the world would already know about the Stargate Program and who'd been managing it. Instead, it was as if the Air Force—or the United States, for that matter—are no longer of any importance in this era."

"Huh, I'd been wondering why all the weird questions in the middle of our Mexican standoff."

"Actually, McKay," Mitchell said, "a Mexican standoff is when—"

"I know what a Mexican standoff is. It was just a metaphor."

"A bad one."

"It doesn't matter! You got the point."

"Right," Mitchell concluded. "Anyway, is it just me or that woman does bear some resemblance to Linea?"

Everyone looked at him. "How could you possibly compare her to Linea if you never actually met her?" Daniel asked.

"No, but I did read the file. Cold, calculating, even kind of unstable. I mean, I don't know how the Destroyer of Worlds would have looked like, but if you asked me, I'd say that old gal we just met is her."

"She does seem like she is concealing some kind of deep, dangerous secret, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c said.

"See? Thank you, Teal'c," Mitchell said. The old Jaffa just acknowledged with a nod.

"I guess you're right," Daniel conceded, "but right now, she's the only human we've found so far and the only one who speaks the same language as these aliens. I'm sorry to say this, but right now, she's our only option of learning where we are and what has happened in this reality."

The sound of the brig's door opening echoed through the corridor separating the holding cells. The old woman walked in and immediately fixed her eyes on Daniel. "The United States ceased to exist as an independent country hundreds of years ago," she said, "shortly before the formation of the United Nations Space Command and the Unified Earth Government."

Daniel was baffled for a couple of seconds, until the woman spoke again. "That's the answer to the question you asked before." Then she signaled with her head to someone on the far side of the room, and the force fields were lowered.

"I am Dr. Catherine Elizabeth Halsey," the woman said. "I'm sorry for the treatment you've received, but you must understand that, when you're at war, you can trust no one. Come with me, please."

SG-1 looked at each other. They left their cells and followed Dr. Halsey hesitantly. She led them back to the hangar and a series of corridors until they reached a large room crawling with Sangheili. The massive window at the front was filled with a beautiful landscape of the artificial world's surface, what looked as its core, and the space beyond. If Daniel had to guess, he'd say this was the control center of the alien base—or the bridge of a ship.

"Welcome to the _Glorified Wisdom_'s bridge" Dr. Halsey said, confirming Daniel's latter suspicion. "I'm sure you have many more questions to ask."

"Yeah," Mitchell said. "For starters, what the hell is going on here? Not an hour ago, you were treating us as war prisoners, and suddenly your mind has changed?"

"It was not suddenly, Colonel Mitchell," she replied. "In fact, I am still dubious about you, but all evidence is in your favor."

"Evidence?" Mitchell asked.

"Your weapons, for example. Your P90s. There is no record of them ever been manufactured, but they do share a certain resemblance to a 19th century submachine gun known as the M70, which is also the ancestor of the newest M7/Caseless SMG. Your uniforms are like nothing ever used by the United States Air Force. The probe you sent before you came, primitive as it may be, is unique in its design. And the symbol your friend sports in his forehead." This she said motioning to Teal'c. "There is no language in this galaxy where you could find such a symbol."

"You haven't even met the Jaffa in this reality?" Daniel said before he realized he hadn't proposed his theory yet.

"So, you do come from a different reality, aren't, you?" Halsey said. Before Daniel could mutter another word, she continued. "I know about the theory of the multiverse, Dr. Jackson. The fact that you seemingly appeared out of nowhere inside a Forerunner structure with no idea of where you were or what was happening here is the final confirmation. And now that we've settled that, I presume your next questions will be focused on finding out how different is this reality from yours."

Several second passed without anyone saying another word until Daniel thought of the proper question to ask. "You said you're at war. May I ask with whom?"

Halsey smiled. "I'm afraid in order to answer that, Dr. Jackson, I'll need to give you all a long historical review."

And during the next twenty minutes or so, Catherine Halsey briefed SG-1 on the last five hundred of history of Earth, the UNSC, space colonization, the insurrectionists, the genocidal war against the Covenant, a religious collective of races bent on eradicate any and all traces of mankind, the discovery of something called the Halo Array, and the Flood infection. Daniel wasn't sure about his friends, but he was both frightened and fascinated at the same time to hear all this, as well as intrigued by the fact that, despite humanity had had its own problems among itself, and recently with other races, this reality had remained completely free of the Goa'uld domination and the Ori invasion.

This also made him wonder, why had it taken this people so many years to reach other worlds. Had they never learned how to use the Stargate? How come she hadn't even mentioned it at all? On the other hand, he was also wondering what was this artificial world and why there were so many first-generation Stargates stored there. Halsey had mentioned earlier the word "Forerunners", both when talking about the place they had arrived at when describing the Halo Array. Who were these Forerunners? Perhaps the inheritors of the Precursors' Mantle mentioned in the Ancients' record? How many Stargates had they collected, and why?

"It took a Covenant civil conflict and the support of the Covenant Separatists to finally win the war, defeat the Flood, and eliminate the impending threat of the Halo Array," Halsey said, snapping Daniel out of his own thoughts, "and humanity prevailed. That was five years ago. But instead of establishing a truce with the defeated races, the

UNSC leadership decided to switch roles and eliminate them.

"I'm part of a very small fraction of humans who were against this action. Most of us were hunted down and executed. I barely managed to escape with my life and find refuge with the Sangheili, who were now in the midst of a new war for the survival of their race. I've been with them ever since, searching for a refuge amongst the stars. They have been kind enough to put me in charge of one of their ships to achieve this goal. Just a few weeks ago, we found this place, this Forerunner Installation known as The Ark."

"Wait," Daniel said. "Who exactly are the Forerunners?"

"You mean, who were the Forerunners, Dr. Jackson," Halsey said. "The Forerunners were the most advanced race in this galaxy a hundred thousand years ago."

"More than the Ancients?" Daniel asked. Halsey frowned at this, which made Daniel wonder "You don't know who the Ancients are?"

"No," she replied.

"Well, then I think it's time for you to know about our history," Daniel said.

"Daniel" Mitchell said with a tone of warning in his voice.

"Cam" Daniel replied. "If Dr. Halsey has been kind enough to shed some light in the events of this reality, I think it's just fair that we do the same." He tried to make a small sign with his face, to make it clear he didn't intend to say everything. Mitchell seemed to understand, as both nodded knowingly.

Now it was Daniel who did all the talking, explaining as much as he could about the discovery of the Stargate and the Stargate program, as well as the war with the Goa'uld and the Ori. He thought about mentioning Atlantis but in the end he kept this information to himself. He did, however, talk about the Ancients, their vast influence in the Milky Way, and their Alliance of Four Great Races.

"In fact," he said, "that's the reason why we're here. We found an Ancient text describing their journey to other galaxies. Among other things, it mentioned their encounter with a race known as the Precursors who resided in what we call the Andromeda galaxy, about two million light-years away from Earth. It appears they forged a specific and separate alliance with them millennia ago, and it also contained the Stargate address leading to it. That's why we came here, to search what was left of the Pre" "

"Hold on," Halsey interrupted. "You do realize you are still in the Milky Way, albeit in a different reality?"

"Yes," Daniel answered. "In fact, that's bugging me a little. I've been thinking that perhaps the answer may be in another text we found along with the Ancient record, but it's written in a language I've never seen before." Then he thought of something. "Maybe there's something back at the structure we arrived at that could help me translate it" "some sort of cypher or something."

"Why do you think that?" Halsey asked.

"Honestly, I don't know," Daniel said. "Call it a gut feeling."

Halsey seemed to mull it over for a few moments. She turned to some of the Sangheili and spoke to them in their language—"at least Daniel thought it was their language. After several minutes, she turned again to SG-1. "These Sangheili will accompany you back to the shrine. This," she said, motioning to one of the aliens, "is Edo 'Nodam. He knows our language and will serve you as translator. I'm also placing a Phantom dropship at your disposition. I will join you later so I can assist you in anything else you may need. I hope this is enough payment for previous grievances, at least for now."

"Thank you," Daniel said.

And with that, SG-1, escorted by their new companions, left the bridge and headed for the hangar. True enough, a ship just like the one that had brought them here was waiting for them, hovering over the floor and with its gravity lift active, beckoning the team closer. Once aboard, the ship speeded out of the hangar and through the air, taking them back to the Stargate.

Mitchell had signaled the team to remain silent during the trip. Everything they needed to discuss, they'd discuss later. For now, the only thing that mattered was to find a way to dial back to Earth—"if such a thing was still possible"—to report everything they'd seen and heard so far.

* * *

><p>In orbit above Wraith homeworld, Pegasus galaxy

USS George Hammond

1530 hrs. August 4, 2013

"MALP-1 is almost in position, Colonel," Zelenka said. "MALP-2 is still en route."

"Thank you, Radek," Sam said. She was working behind him, using the Asgard computer core to generate a 3-D model of the crashed alien ship, based on the data from additional scans and telemetry acquired from the probes. The latter was a bit more problematic, as the interior of the ship presented the same amount of decay as the Wraith Hives—"which was odd, considering the non-organic nature of this ship.

Still, the results were, so far, enlightening. The MALP-2 had already found several shield generators, as well as some advanced ship-to-ship combat weapons, scattered throughout the outer hull. The MALP-1 had been beamed down to what they'd believed was the engine room, and it had turned out they were correct. From there, the probe had made its way through the debris, heading for the power room.

Sam was beginning to think the Wraith had, somehow, overcome the plague that had befallen upon them and their planet, found the wrecked

ship, and reverse-engineered its shield-generating ability. But since a shielding system required a lot of power to operate, they also had to have found a way to increase the energy output on their ships. And the data collected from the battle the day before proved so. It was only a matter of finding out if the Wraith had also retrofitted their ships with a new power system adapted from the one in this ship.

Then, there was the other thing: finding out from where could this ship had come from. She had been considering using the crash mark's relative position to the approximate location of the planet at the possible time of reentry to determine the exact point in space where the ship had emerged from. Then, assuming the ship had not made several hyperspace jumps at different locations, she would be able to extrapolate the origin of the ship. Finally, a while ago, she'd decided to try it. It was a long shot at best, but it was all they had.

"MALP-1 has reached location," Zelenka said. The image from the probe showed a large room with a core like nothing Sam had seen before. "Scans indicate there are small traces of tritium all over the place."

"Hmmâ€¦ Tritium is one of the isotopes of hydrogen, and it can be used for fusion reactors on Earth," Sam thought out loud. "So, this is indeed an alien fusion reactor."

"It would appear so, yes," Zelenka said.

Sam heard footsteps. She turned to see Sheppard and Teyla standing by the entrance. "Hey, what's the news?" Sheppard asked.

"Well," Sam said while modifying the model she'd been working on, "it seems like the updates to the cruiser we fought yesterday did come from this ship." She diverted her eyes from the Asgard screen to see Teyla. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, Colonel," she answered, "although I think this experience is going to haunt me for a long time."

"I can imagine," Sam said. "I only saw those things from the bridge, but seeing them up close must have been quite frightening."

"Yeah," Sheppard said. "Even Ronon was freaked out to death."

"How is he?" Sam asked. She knew they'd been spending a lot of time in the infirmary with him after his surgery.

"He's conscious," Teyla said, "but he's quiteâ€¦ worried."

"He wouldn't stop apologizing for losing it the way he did," Sheppard added. "But from what the doctor told us, it was just probably a result of going into shock after he got injured."

"How did he even get so badly injured?" Sam asked.

"From what he told us, during the first attack, one Wraith came out of nowhere, grabbed him, and sent him flying about 20 feet away. He almost got impaled himself with a rock upon landing. It barely missed him."

"He was unconscious and had a severe bleeding when I found him," Teyla said. "Captain Brown was providing cover for me while I tried to contain it. Then I saw the Captain on the floor and a Wraith materializing in front of him."

"Ronon chose that moment to wake up," Sheppard said. "He saw the Wraith feeding off Brown and the transformation he suffered. The shock just made it worse."

"He's tough," Sam said. "He'll get over this."

"Colonel," Zelenka interrupted, "both MALPs have completed their surveys. Shall I beam them up?"

"Is that wise?" Sheppard asked.

"No," Sam said. "Who knows what kind of thing we'd be taking aboard?"

The Asgard core beeped. The background program she'd left running had completed its calculations. Sam turned to the screen and stared at the results for several moments in disbelief.

"Sheppard," she said, "remind me, where did the nine-chevron address Daniel discovered lead to?"

"From what they told us in their last transmission from Atlantisâ€¦ the Andromeda galaxy. At least I think it wasâ€¦"

"You _think_?"

"No, sorry, I'm sure it was the Andromeda galaxy. Why? What's the problem?"

"The problem is," Sam said gravelly, "according to these calculations, the ship we've just found originally came from the Andromeda galaxy."

* * *

><p>Forerunner Installation 00, designate "The Ark"

Glorified Wisdom

2300 hrs. October 8, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Soon, my dear, Halsey thought while staring at one of the holograms in front of her. _Soon_.

She was at her private lab aboard the ship, working on the Janus Key, holding it with both hands while trying to catalog as many locations as possible now that it was finally complete. The last few months of research on it had provenâ€¦ _almost_ unfruitful. She still couldn't believe how lucky she'd been to be able to extrapolate the Ark's coordinates during the only successful attempt to extract data from her half of the key.

_Hell, I still can't believe how lucky I am to have made it this

far, she thought. She knew she was only alive today because Jul 'Mdama was a blood-thirsty, vengeance-driven Elite who didn't care to throw honor off the window in order to make the UNSC pay for the death of his wife and compatriots. This she had learned through several accounts of her crew. 'Mdama had seen in Halsey a unique opportunity to not only find but also revive Forerunner tech still undiscovered by humanity, and he didn't care to use one human in order to destroy the rest.

Of course, if she had been given the option, she would have preferred to return to the relative safety of imprisonment in one of ONI's secret facilities than to remain in the midst of the sworn enemy of the human race. But after being betrayed by the UNSC, she'd had nowhere else to run than straight into the Covenant hands—or hand, specifically. The Didact's Hand. Now, even though a hatred for some of her own kind was burning inside her, she was only trying to survive by any means necessary.

Still, she was hoping against all hope that John would not blame her for her actions.

When she had learned that he was alive, she had felt infused with new life, with hope, with purpose. But also with a bitterness that gnawed through her soul. ONI had tried to make her believe for a long time that her favorite Spartan had died, and at times she'd feared it was true. But John was not only the most capable Spartan she'd met; he was also the luckiest Spartan alive. And she was sticking to that thought. Years ago, when he'd rescued her from a Covenant carrier, she'd told him that his luck had rubbed off on her.

She believed this now more than ever. The fact that 'Mdama had entrusted her with a Corvette and a fairly competent crew should have been more than enough to confirm it. But when some of the Sangheili aboard her ship had revealed their true allegiances to her, she'd been stunned. They were neither Storm nor entirely sympathetic to the Arbiter, but belonged to a smaller faction which believed in the Reclaimer rights handed down to humanity by the Forerunners. They feared 'Mdama would ultimately bring upon their race the wrath of the gods if he kept fighting their chosen ones. On the other hand, they were also convinced that the current human leadership was walking down a path of self-destruction that would eventually affect every living being in this galaxy.

It was perfect. They had pledged their loyalty to her, even made her leader of their renegade faction. If she played her cards right, they would be able to both overthrow 'Mdama and eradicate the corrupt elements in the UEG and all its branches. And she would have her revenge.

Of course, she had been convinced by her newfound allies to play the role of a sycophantic religious freak in front of both 'Mdama and the UNSC if she was to survive longer. But even now, she was suspecting 'Mdama was already questioning her allegiances.

The 'intergalactic travelers' she'd just found now provided her with a new option.

She believed they were not telling her everything, but then again, neither was she. If anything, she had twisted part of the story to her favor, trying to appear as the victim and not the enemy. Not that

she wasn't a victim. Still, now, if they ran into the UNSC—who would surely be looking for Commander Palmer and Major Sullivan—and they told another version of the story, SG-1 would find themselves wondering who was telling the absolute truth. At best, it would buy her some time before losing such a valuable asset. Who knew? If they found new knowledge about the Forerunners' history or even something leading to a new treasure trove of technology before the UNSC found them, it would give her some really needed leverage with the Covenant.

Her lab's door opened. "Shipmistress Halsey!" It was Guko 'Zuram, her Sangheili right hand and fifth columnist. "The Didact's Hand is demanding to speak with you."

She sighed. "Did he say why?" Her question carried a sarcastic, defying tone, even though she knew there was no other choice but to comply as quickly as possible if she was to let 'Mdama believe she was loyal to him. She stood with the Key in her hands, separating both halves and storing them in her robotic arm before heading to the bridge.

"Link status?" Halsey asked once she got there.

"Stable, Shipmistress," was the answer of the Sangheili at the comms station.

Halsey walked up to the holo-projector at the center of the control room where the image of Jul 'Mdama, the 'Didact's Hand', illuminated her face. His eyes were glaring menacingly at her.

"Have you found anything useful at the Ark?" 'Mdama asked bluntly in his native language.

Thankfully, Halsey had already spent enough time learning how to speak, not only understand. "There's still so much ground to cover" she replied in the same language. "We've barely begun to."

"I don't want excuses!" he ranted. "I am well aware that the Infinity is already at the Installation. They've already destroyed three of my cruisers, the same cruisers I had sent to support your small operation there!"

He knew that the Infinity was at the Ark? She had been careful not to reveal such a delicate thing to him. He was supposed to remain oblivious to his secret meeting with Sullivan, after all. So, I have someone feeding him information. I wonder how much. She was playing a dangerous game here. If she said something recklessly, it was over. However, 'Mdama had already screwed up; in his rage, he had unwittingly let on that he had a plant in her midst. It might have given her the upper hand.

"Maybe so," she replied, "but is the loss of three cruisers such a big price to pay for this?" She pulled both pieces of the Key from within her prosthetic arm and raised them over her head so that Jul could see them clearly. "The crew of the Infinity was so busy taking down your petty little ships that they never noticed my cloaked Corvette was too close to them. I managed to get a SpecOps team aboard, undetected, and they were successful in retrieving the second half of the Librarian's Gift."

Jul held his gaze in apparent unbelief for a full ten seconds before finally speaking again. "Impressive, Doctor Halsey. You have served me well." He then made a movement with his head, as if beckoning someone elseâ€œ"

Of course.

She turned around just in time to see a stealth Elite closing in behind her. She dodged the blow from his plasma blade and drew her own energy sword on her left hand, impaling his would-be assassin with an agility not even she thought had. When her aggressor was laying down cold on the floor, she turned to confront 'Mdamaâ€œhis hologram, anyway.

"You will not get rid of me so easily," she said. "And for the record, if your lapdog here had succeeded in eliminating me, you would have lost any and all chances of possessing the secrets this artifact holds."

She fused the Key together for a couple of seconds, allowing Jul to see what he'd so wanted to see. Then, she separated it and beckoned Guko to her side, handing him both halves of the Key. He looked terrified, as if he believed himself to be unworthy to see this Sacred Icon, let alone touch it. But Halsey reassured him with a nod, and he took the artifact with shaking hands. However, when he tried to link the pieces together, nothing happened. He tried doing it again a couple more times without success.

"What have you done to the Librarian's Gift?!" 'Mdama roared, his eyes spitting out fire and brimstone.

"It's not what I did," Halsey said, her tone calm but confident. "It's what the Librarian did. She gave me the Key, and I believe she ensured I would be the only one to unlock its secrets. If you were here, I would gladly give it to you, but I doubt the result would have been any different than what you just saw."

She could see Jul was just about to explode. He was clenching his mandibles so tightly Halsey thought his teeth would just crack and fall apart. He waited several moments, allowing her last statement to sink in. "You still need me, Jul 'Mdama," she finally said. "There's no getting around that anytime soon."

She took the Key from Guko's hands and started to walk away from the hologram; then, she turned and stared at Jul's eyes one more time. "And if I ever find out again you've been using spies on me," she said, "I will make sure you never get to see the Key again. Is that clear?" She didn't even wait for him to answer; she just left the bridge and returned to her lab.

She had won this battle. A small victory which had gained her more time. She intended to use this time the best way possible, before her luck ran out.

We make our own luck, John had told her once. She clang on to those words with all her might.

She closed the door of her lab and made sure it would remain locked up tightly until she decided to go out again. She still had both pieces of the Janus Key in her hands. She put them together once

more, freeing the holograms encased within it. One of them stood out from among the rest. Halsey had already seen it since the first time the Key had been activated before her. It was the shape of a human being, a female, curled up in a fetal position, as if waiting to be reborn.

Halsey had already lost a daughter. Mirandaâ€¦ She was not willing to let the other die as well. She would find a way to bring her back to life by any means.

"Soon, Cortana," she said. "Soon."

* * *

><p>And there's Chapter 5. I hope you enjoyed it.

Before any of you points out my "mistake" when describing the Covenant cruiser found by the crew of the **_Hammond_****, let me clarify. It's not a ****_CCS_****-class battlecruiser, but a ****_CRS_****-class light cruiser, just like the ones seen in Halo 4. For those who may not know, this is essentially a smaller and weaker version of the ****_CCS_****-class.**

Thank you for your time, and don't forget to review and favorite on your way out!

6. Chapter 6: Rosetta

A/N: That's right! Chapter 6 is fresh out of the oven! I hope you all enjoy it.

* * *

><p>Forerunner Installation 00, designate "The Ark"

Shrine of the Rings of Life

1100 hrs. October 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Halsey descended from her Phantom holding her data pad in her hand and walked towards the shrine's entrance. Edo 'Nodam was standing by it, waiting for her to arrive.

"Talk to me," she said.

"The humans have been busy," he replied as they walked inside the structure. "They split up as soon as they got here. The leader and the short one went looking for some sort of device, while the quadruple-eyed one and his tall friend began searching for 'the address'."

"That's what he said?"

"His exact words, Shipmistress."

"Have they had any success?"

"They have. The first two couldn't find the device they were looking for, so they returned to the Rings Hall and began tampering with the one they came through. Then, just a few hours ago"

Halsey stopped walking when Edo paused. "What?"

"It came to life," he said.

"Really?" Dr. Jackson had explained her how the Stargates worked, and to think two universes in different eras each could be connected by a wormhole. She wouldn't have imagined it in a lifetime. And she had imagined some pretty wild stuff before. "What did they do with it once it came to life?"

"They just talked," Edo answered. "With someone on the other side, I think. Then, the waters on the Ring of Life disappeared and they just asked to leave, saying they wanted to explore other parts of the Ark."

This troubled Halsey. Not their exploring as much as their contacting their Earth. If for some reason these people didn't trust her, they could be calling in reinforcements to secure this place for their own purposes. How many and with how much firepower, she had no way of knowing. Still, there was no way she could tell them everything. No, she had to earn their trust while keeping her cover story intact. And the best way to do so was by sharing knowledge.

She had to win over Dr. Jackson.

"What about the others?" she asked, resuming her pace.

"They ventured further inside the structure, a few levels down in fact, until they stumbled onto another room with walls covered in a foreign language. They've been there ever since."

"Foreign?"

"Some of it barely resembles Forerunner writing. The rest is unknown to me, but the one they call Daniel Jackson seems to be familiarized with it."

"Is that so?" Edo simply nodded. "Very well. Keep an eye out for the two at the Rings Hall. Notify me if they do anything out of the ordinary." She activated her holographic disguise and headed for the room where Dr. Jackson would be.

As she walked through the massive hallways, she recalled when she was working on the Forerunner artifact on Reach all those years ago. Back then, she couldn't help but to be amazed by the majesty of it. Now, she couldn't believe how used she'd grown to Forerunner tech and architecture. But she did wonder would humanity one day be able to advance to such a wondrous level of advancement? Or even higher? _Surely not if we keep walking down the path we're on now._

Since she hadn't asked Edo for directions to the 'language room', she wandered for quite some time until she finally arrived at a cavernous square chamber, easily large enough to fit the anchor of a space elevator. The entrance was circular, roughly the same size as one of the Stargates in the Rings Hall. In fact, it was surrounded by the same symbols as the ones found on the central Stargate, the one SG-1

had come through.

The roof was several hundred meters above the ground; it was transparent, and the light coming through was shimmering, as if penetrating through water, which meant the shrine extended way beyond what she'd thought at first, maybe even below a lake. The chamber walls were engraved with four different languages, one for each wall. Each letter or symbol was about the size of a ten-year old child.

Dr. Jackson was looking up to the wall right in front of the entrance, using some sort of camcorder to record the symbols in the room. His Jaffa—“as he had called him—“companion was standing beside him, his gaze fixed on the chamber entrance, while four of her Elites were keeping guard one at each corner of the room. As she approached Jackson, he turned around, apparently having heard her footsteps. The echoing here was quite perceptible. “Doctor Halsey,” he acknowledged her.

“Well, Doctor Jackson. It would seem like you found what you were looking for.”

“Yes!” he replied, unable to conceal his excitement. “This—this is amazing! The language of each of the Four Great Races is all written in these walls. Here,” he said, pointing to the wall in front of them. “This is our mystery language. That one,” he pointed to the wall on his right, “is Asgard. That,” he motioned to the wall on his left, “is Nox, I think. And that,” he concluded, turning to point his finger towards the wall behind him, “that writing is Ancient. The text in the last three languages is the same, so maybe I can translate this one by comparison. This whole place is like a titanic alien version of the Rosetta Stone!”

“I'm sorry, the what?” Halsey asked.

“The Rosetta Stone. A stone discovered in the late 18th century which allowed archaeologists to decipher and understand the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs.”

“I believe you're talking about the Memphis Stone,” Halsey said.

Jackson seemed confused at first; then, his expression changed, as if realizing something. “Of course. It stands to reason that some things in this reality are named differently than in ours. Your Rosetta Stone is named after the city where the decree inscribed in it was first issued.”

“That is correct,” Halsey said. She looked around for a few moments, taking in the astonishing sight of this room. Then she spoke again. “You knew you would find something like this, Doctor. How?”

“Oh, I didn't know,” he said, smiling, “but I had a hunch. I mean, the Ancients wouldn't record a Gate address and an alien text alongside it without knowing there would be a way of translating it on the other side for those who found it. Still, I never imagined I would find something of this magnitude!”

Halsey watched Dr. Jackson's face and couldn't help but smile. He was like a child on Christmas Day, exceedingly excited about his new

toys. He kind of reminded her of herself at a younger age, when she believed she could do anything. And to be honest, right now she was growing the same level of excitement as him. They would get along just perfectly.

She stared at the Jaffa for a couple of seconds. "Is your friend always so eloquent?" she asked Jackson.

"Teal'c? Oh, yeah. Though at times, he is even more expressive."

The Jaffa raised an eyebrow but didn't seem offended by this statement. It was as if he was used to this kind of sarcasm. Halsey eventually diverted her gaze back to the wall in front of them and began to understand why Edo hadn't been able to ascertain what language was this. If she had to guess, she'd say it was a derivative of the Forerunner language found in artifacts and structures all over the galaxy, composed of both glyphs and a more conventional writing system.

"So, what does it say?"

"It's the Mantle," Jackson said. "I think this place was built as a temple in its honor. It describes in four different languages what the Mantle is, its mandates and instructions, rules and guidelinesâ€"i-it's incredible!"

"Indeed," Teal'c said in a stoic voice. It was the first time she'd heard him speak.

Dr. Jackson kept turning his head back and forth between this wall and the one behind them, muttering a few words in a language similar to Latin and translating them into English. She could hear a few words like _transcendatia_ and _magnus iterinum_. He translated the former as "transcendence" but was still having trouble with the latter. Halsey's eyes suddenly became transfixed on two of the glyphs on the wall. She recognized them.

"'_Magnus iterinum_'," Jackson repeated. "'High path' â€| 'big road' â€| 'Long travel'â€|"

"'Great Journey'," Halsey said.

Dr. Jackson shot her a double-take. "Yes. Yes, that's it! How did you know?"

"That was the name of a popular belief among the Covenant. According to their religion, the Forerunners discovered a way to transcend the physical world and become divine beings, by building and activating the seven Halos, or "Sacred Rings" as the Covenant called them. When this happened, the Halos uplifted the Forerunners into trans-sentience. The ultimate goal of the Covenant was to locate and activate the Halo Installations, believing that in doing so, all faithful adherents to the Covenant Religion would be uplifted as the Forerunners were and become divine beings."

"Interesting," Jackson said.

"Yeah. The Covenant almost wiped out everyone in this galaxy because of it."

"Well, maybe they were wrong about the rings, but I don't think they were too far out on the Forerunners transcendence."

This surprised Halsey. What could he possibly know about this? "What do you mean?"

"Well, this 'Great Journey' sounds a lot like Ascension."

"Ascension?" Halsey repeated.

"Yes. You see, in my reality, the Ancients evolved to a point where they were able to shed their physical bodies and rise to a higher plain of existence, one in which they live as pure energy. With this came a much greater understanding of the universe and all its knowledge. From what you told me about how advanced the Forerunners were, I wouldn't be surprised if they also learned how to ascend."

Halsey was lost for words with this revelation. It was entirely possible, then, that the Forerunners actually became 'gods', for lack of a better word? "How do you even know this?" she asked.

"Uh, part of it comes from several texts and records we've found scattered throughout the galaxy, but I have to admit most of it we learned when we met a few Ascended beings. One of them actually helped me ascend, twice."

"What?" This man had already been to a higher plain of existence? Was such a thing even possible?

"Yep. Can't tell you much about it, though. The others wiped my memories from my time with them when they descended me."

"Why did they do that?" Halsey asked. She had to admit she'd never been so curious about something.

"My friends were in trouble and I couldn't stand sitting on my hands and doing nothing," Jackson said. "I helped them, and by doing so, I broke one of the Ascended most sacred rules: never to interfere with the lowest plains."

"They don't interact with the rest of us?"

"Aside from the Ori, no, most of them don't. There's only been a handful of Ascended Ancients who've actually broken the same rule, and they've all suffered the consequences."

"The Ori?" Halsey tried to remember what Daniel had mentioned about them the day before. "I don't recall you saying the Ori were Ascended."

"I didn't, did I?" he replied with a smirk on his face, not one of deviousness but of amusement, as if he had forgotten to include such a delicate thing in his review.

"No, you just said they were a bunch of religious nuts just like the Covenant, with the only difference being in their wanting to convert everyone to their religion instead of completely exterminate them."

"That's true. The thing is, the Ori were other Ascended beings who instructed those beneath them to worship them, for in doing so they received power from those who willfully gave up their free will to them."

That final statement scared the hell out of Halsey. Why had the Covenant worshipped the Forerunners as gods at all? Had it been because of superstition, out of fear and awe for everything they left behind? Or had the Forerunners actually forced the Covenant to worship them? Or worse, to destroy humanity? From the UNSC's experience with the Didact and a few Forerunner records ONI had found—and which Major Sullivan had shared with her—the Forerunners had, in fact, fought against ancient humans for many years. What if, out of contempt, some Ascended Forerunners had ordered the Covenant to leave no trace of human presence in this galaxy?

And still, the prospect of having the chance to meet them—to be like them. If Jackson was telling the truth, if there was the slightest possibility that an ordinary human like her could achieve such a level of evolution. After everything she'd been through, she still desperately wanted to know everything. All the secrets of the universe.

And it could provide her with an escape.

Now it was Halsey who couldn't contain a smile. She had come here to try and get Dr. Jackson to trust her by sharing knowledge with him. Instead, she had been the one to get more knowledge than what she would've ever hoped for.

"Do you understand these symbols, Dr. Halsey?" Jackson asked.

"The language is somewhat different than what I've previously seen," she replied, "but I do understand some of it. Do you require assistance?"

"I'd appreciate it, Dr. Halsey," he said.

"Catherine," she said. She couldn't understand why she felt compelled to say this. "Call me Catherine."

"Catherine," Jackson replied. "Your name reminds me of someone." He appeared lost in his thoughts for a few moments before he spoke again. "Daniel. Call me Daniel."

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC _Infinity_

1500 hrs. October 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"We're halfway to the MIA status," Roland said, a somber tone in his voice.

By now, Lasky was well beyond concerned about Sully, Sarah, and Fireteam Hammer. The latter were new to the SPARTAN Program, and even

with the level of training they received, they were still inexperienced in the field. He didn't even know if Sully had taken any weapon at all. Palmer was a pro, but not even she was invincible. No one could yet tell if there were still Covenant troops somewhere down there. And Roland was still trying to figure out what was going on in that location.

At this point, there was nothing else he could do.

"I'm not giving up hope on them just yet," he said. "Found anything?"

"Ship's sensors have detected the same energy signature two more times," Roland said. "One about 14 hours ago, and the other one about nine hours ago. I've been looking into it, and as far as I can tell, it's definitely not radioactive or lethal. I think."

"Make up your mind, Roland. 'Definitely' or 'you think'?"

"Definitely, Captain."

"So, it is safe to send a search and rescue party down there?"

"I still wouldn't do that. There's something else going on there."

"Roland!"

"I'm doing my best, Captain! This is like nothing I've ever seen. I myself am having a hard time trying to understand this, and keep in mind AIs perceive time in a much different way than you humans!"

This was the first time Lasky had seen Roland snapping like this. Someone else would have immediately reprimanded him, reminding him of his origin and purpose. But after meeting Cortana, he had learned that AIs were just as human as the next guy in this ship. They could develop feelings. He knew he was being tough with him, and not even his concerns justified this.

"I'm sorry, Roland," Lasky said.

"No, please forgive me, Captain," the AI replied. He did look ashamed of losing it the way he just had. The avatar sighed. "Look, Captain Lasky, to the best of my knowledge, each time this energy signature appears, there's also a subspace disturbance in the area."

"You mean Slipspace," Lasky said.

"No, Captain. I used the term 'subspace' on purpose. This disturbance is occurring in a different region of subspace than the one we know. I'm not even sure how it is that the ships sensors are picking it up at all."

"Do you have any theories?"

"Maybe one. The first two times, the disturbance carried some sort of energy pattern, which reminded me on one of the oldest existing theories on intergalactic travel." The holotable suddenly became

alive as Roland projected two spheres, one on each side of the table. "So, let's assume these are two points in space, separated by a distance of several light years. Travelling between them, even through Slipspace, would take a very long time. Unless you do thisâ€¦" Then, Roland linked both spheres with a tunnel. "This is called a wormhole, and it has been said for centuries that it would allow for almost instantaneous interstellar trips."

"And you think this is what we've been picking up?" Lasky asked.

"It's possible. And you know what this could mean."

Lasky did but wouldn't admit it. Not yet. And now that he knew what they might be facing, he was not willing to wait anymore. "I'm sending them down there."

"Captainâ€¦"

"My people is still down there, and no matter what the odds or the dangers, I'm willing to take my chances trying to bring them back home." He paused, looked away from the holotable, and pulled from underneath his uniform a small piece of blue, polished metal. He held it firmly in his hand; it reminded him of his escape from Corbuloâ€¦ of who had helped him escape. Of what he'd taught him that day without saying a single word to him. "And there's no one else I would count on for such a mission."

He returned to the table and pressed the comms button, opening a secure channel to a room elsewhere in the ship. "Chief, I've got a mission for you and your team."

* * *

><p>Temple of the Mantle

The Ark

0623 hrs. August 5, 2013

Any doubts Daniel had had about Catherine Halsey had virtually dissipated at this point.

As soon as the Sangheili had dropped them off at the structure housing the Stargate, McKay had immediately begun searching for the DHD without further explanation. Mitchell had thought it would be wise to move in pairs while exploring the place, and so he went with McKay while Teal'c had remained with Daniel. Of course, it was up to him to find the nine-chevron address needed to dial back to Atlantis, and when he didn't find it in the Gate room, he began walking farther away from the Gate room, Teal'c by his side at all times.

Later, Mitchell had contacted them by radio, saying they hadn't found squat and that they were going back to the Gate to try and dial manually since, according to McKay, this 'world' easily had to have more than enough power to dial back to their galaxy. He didn't explicitly say it, but Daniel knew Mitchell was subtly telling him to move it faster. Just a few minutes after that, he found the chamber, its entrance being a virtually perfect depiction of the Stargate. The symbols embedded on each of its chevrons formed the address he was

looking for.

By then, no one had said a word about their experience aboard Halsey's ship, focusing instead on the task at hand. But when McKay had succeeded in dialing the address Daniel had found and he had been able to contact Atlantis, after giving his report on where they were and their current situation—which surely had given Jack one hell of a headache, Mitchell had told O'Neill exactly what he'd said back on the ship's brig about Halsey reminding him of Linea. Needless to say, those words had immediately made Jack wary, and he had told Mitchell to keep an eye out on her and her 'minions'. Daniel had wanted to defend her, but he himself still didn't know if she could be trusted entirely.

Now, after working with her side by side for the last few hours, he believed in her.

He wanted to think he had become a good judge of character after so many years at the SGC. There was no way Halsey could be a murderer like Linea. If anything, she looked desperate, afraid. And even then, when she'd heard about this place, her eyes had shone with curiosity, leaving aside all concerns and fears, yearning for knowledge. She reminded him of his dearest friend Catherine Langford, the one who had brought him into the Stargate Program almost two decades ago. Daniel was certain Halsey was just the way Catherine might have been in her youth.

He heard footsteps outside of the room. Rushing footsteps. A few seconds later, he saw Edo and a few other Sangheili in a hurry.

"Shipmistress!" Edo yelled in English. "We saw four demons heading this way!"

Daniel wasn't sure if he'd heard correctly. "What did he just say?" he asked Halsey.

She didn't answer him, instead addressing Edo. "Where?"

"Outside of the shrine, coming out of the tree line."

"How were they like?"

"Big, Shipmistress," Edo said. "_Really_ big."

The look of Halsey's face was one of concern. "Where are our other guests?"

"Their Phantom was on their way back. We've contacted them and told them to fall back to the ship."

Upon hearing this, Daniel pressed the button on his radio. "Mitchell, McKay, come in."

"Daniel, what's going on? These guys are saying it isn't safe to go back to the Gate."

"I'm not sure," he replied. "Gimme just a minute." Halsey had already sprinted towards the entrance to the chamber, and now she was searching for something in the threshold. Daniel ran to her.

"Catherine, what's happening?"

"Spartans," was her answer.

"Spartans?" Daniel repeated.

"The UNSC's supersoldiers and elite military units. They must be searching for me."

The entrance became sealed by a set of sliding doors that weren't there when Daniel had arrived, and Daniel knew she was trying to lock themselves in. "You know there's no way out of this place other than that, don't you?"

"Yes, but I can't risk myself or my Elites being caught."

"And if they have a way of knowing we're in here?"

"Then we'll have to fight," she said in a determinate yet dreadful voice. "But I _truly_ hope it doesn't come to that."

He didn't know why, but Daniel felt like there was something else going on here. "Catherine, is there's something you're not telling me?"

She hesitated for a moment. "I created them."

"The Spartans?"

"Yes. Theyâ€¦ they had a special training since they were young. You could say I raised them. They used to see me as a mother. And now the UNSC has turned them against me." Daniel could sense sadness in her voice when saying this. "I was hoping I'd get a chance to talk to them and convince them to join our cause," she continued, "but not like this. Not by putting you and my Elites in the line."

Silence settled upon the chamber in a creepy way. One could hear a needle drop. As time passed, however, Daniel began hearing more footsteps outside, rhythmic, steady footsteps. "What will happen if they find us anyways?" he asked.

"Honestly, I don't know," Halsey said. She looked to the floor as if searching for a solution that wasn't there. "Do you believe in miracles, Daniel?"

He was about to reply when his radio crackled. But it wasn't Mitchell or McKay.

"_SG-1, this is _Hammond_. Do you read?"_ That was Sam's voice. Daniel was so stunned by this, his mind so confused, he couldn't even respond. How had _she_ been able to cross between realities and time?

"_SG-1, this is _Hammond_. Please, respond."_ It was Sam, alright. How, he didn't know. He could only smile.

"What were you saying about miracles, Catherine?" he said. She tilted her head to one side while he removed his earpiece and pressed the button on his radio, leaving it on the lowest volume level possible to allow Halsey to listen in. "_Hammond_, this is Daniel," he

whispered. "Sam, don't get me wrong because you have no idea how good it is to hear your voice, butâ€¦ what are you doing here?"

"It is good to hear you too, Daniel. We were en route to the Andromeda galaxy when our sensors picked up an object in the void beyond it, so we decided to come check it out. When we got here, we picked up your locator beacons' signals."_

"Oh, Sam! I love your timing!"_ That was Mitchell's voice.

"Likewise, Cam. Anyone care to tell me what is this place, exactly?"_

"Sam, I'd love to elaborate," Daniel stepped in, "but we're in a bit of an emergency right now and could use some assistance. Are you picking up other life signs near my position?"

"Yes, I've got several virtually on top of you and Teal'c, and a couple more bearing down on your position."_

"Listen, the life signs on top of us are friends. Can you beam us all up to the _Hammond?"

"Daniel, are you certain?"_

"Yes, and we're kinda in a hurry."

"OK, just gimme a sec."_

"Catherine," Daniel said, smiling, "ready to get out of here?"

"What?" she asked just before the bright light Daniel knew to be the Asgard transporter engulfed them. When it faded, he found himself in the _Hammond_'s bridge, Sam sitting right in front of him. She jumped in her seat at first when she saw the Sangheili but seemed to settle down pretty soon.

"Daniel? Care to introduce your new friends?"

"In a moment, Sam. You got Mitchell's and McKay's signals?"

"Yeah, why? Are they also in danger?"

"Not at the moment, but I bet they'd be more than happy to see you. Especially McKay."

"I bet," she said while nodding to the weapons officer to her right. A few moments later, the rest of SG-1 was onboard the ship.

"Sam! It's good to see you again," Mitchell said.

"You too, Cam," she replied, standing up to embrace him, then Daniel, then Teal'c. Then, she nodded to McKay who was already with his arms half-extended. "Rodney."

"Sam," he replied, lowering his arms. He was obviously disappointed by this rather plain greeting. "I thought you were in Pegasus."

"We were, but something came up. The _Daedalus_ had to return to Earth with the ZPMs. Sheppard and his team went with them."

Rodney just made a "huh" sound. Daniel turned to Halsey and the Sangheili who were crouching to avoid hitting their heads with the bridge's roof. All of them were looking at each other in disbelief. He beckoned Halsey closer. "Catherine, this is my friend and former teammate, Dr. Samantha Carter. Sam, this is Dr. Catherine Halsey."

Halsey, with a look of surprise still on her face, shook Sam's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"You too, I guess," Sam said. "Now, Danielâ€|?"

"I-it's a long story," he said, looking outside the bridge's viewport. From here, the view of the Ark was breathtaking. Then, he saw what he thought to be one of the biggest ships he'd ever seen.

"That's one big ship," Mitchell said, taking the words right out of Daniel's mouth.

"We picked it up just before exiting hyperspace and engaged the cloak the moment we came out of it, just in case."

"They can't see us?" Halsey inquired.

"No, they can't, Doctor."

It appeared to Daniel as if Halsey's amazement escalated the more she was on this ship. "Sam, how about you lend me your Asgard computer core and Dr. Halsey and I tell you everything you want to know on our way there?"

"Why would you need the core for?" Sam replied.

"Let's just say it might make our translating job easier."

"Translating?" Daniel must've made some sort of puppy face because Sam just sighed and began walking out of the bridge, motioning for them to follow her. "What are you gonna translate?"

"You'll see."

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC _Infinity_

1341 hrs. October 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

The sensors on the _Infinity_ were going nuts, but only Roland was fully aware of this. Something big was going on.

"Captain, sensors are detecting something inâ€|" He paused to analyze and process the massive amounts of data, but it was awfully confusing even for him. After a long while he reached a conclusion.

"â€|subspace," he finished his sentence. In spite of all the time he had taken to try and understand what was happening, for Lasky surely not more than one second had passed since he had paused.

"Again not Slipspace?" the captain asked.

"No, sir. But this is also different from the subspace disturbance we've been picking up in the last 36 hours."

Suddenly, the sensors went from absolutely haywire to completely stable as they detected an object emerging into normal space. Less than a second later, it disappeared. For a moment, Roland felt frustrated by all these strange anomalies and his inability to comprehend them, but then he began going over the sensor data and found his very first clue.

The object was artificial in nature, albeit like nothing he'd ever seen or heard of.

Maybe they were dealing with a new race, one which had mastered another level of technology previously unknown to the UNSC. A race capable of who knew how much.

"How is it different?" Captain Lasky asked. Once again, what had been a couple of seconds for him had been several minutes of analyzing and theorizing for Roland. And even then, he could remember perfectly where he had left the conversation and from where to continue.

"I think it's being caused by a ship."

"Covenant?"

"Captain, I don't think we've ever found anything like this. They must've mastered faster-than-light travel through another dimension of subspace, and maybe they're also responsible for the anomalies we've been seeing so far. By the way, they disappeared as soon as it came out of subspace."

"What do you mean by 'it disappeared'?"

"Vanished from our sight and sensors. It's possible they have a way of concealing themselves. I'll try to find a way to locate it."

"Alright, keep me posted."

"Aye, Captain," Roland said just before he received an incoming transmission. "And, Captain, I have Blue Team for you."

Captain Lasky, who had already waked towards the viewport, rushed back to the holotable. "Chief, what've you got?"

"I'm sorry, Captain Lasky," was the response from Sierra-117. _"The place is empty."_

The captain lowered his face in disappointment. "Roger that, Chief. Could you search in the nearby area?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

No more words were pronounced. Captain Lasky walked away from the table while Roland tried to find a way to locate the mystery ship. Not seven minutes later, the sensors picked up yet another anomaly; this time, though, it was not subspace-related. It was an intermittent energy signature somewhere in the middle of space, just above the Ark. Could it be possible the mysterious ship was the source of this anomaly? If so, all Roland would have to do would be to tune _Infinity_'s sensors in order to pinpoint its exact location.

He was close to finding some answers.

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS George Hammond

1700 hrs. October 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Halsey's awe was going from big to massive. First, the Mantle's Chamber, then, being teleported aboard a ship in the blink of an eye. And that had been just the beginning.

Colonel Carter had taken her and Daniel to a room with a piece of technology that didn't match with the rest of the ship. They called it the Asgard computer core. Once there, Daniel had begun working on transferring the images from his camcorder into this core to allow for a faster correlation between the symbols and the other three languages, all the while telling Carter about his experiences here so far. From what she could tell, Daniel had come to trust her completely, and he'd made sure Carter did too.

When Daniel later told them the correlation process would take some time, the Colonel had given her the full tour throughout the ship. It was quite impressive considering its size. Among other things, Colonel Carter had shown her the Engineering room, where she had explained her how the 'hyperdrive' worked. Halsey found it quite intriguing that this ship didn't travel through Slipspace, and when she had explained Carter what it was, she had found it very interesting.

They spent a long time theorizing on how and why this ship had been able to cross between realities apparently without the aid of any additional technology. Neither one of them had been able to reach a logic explanation, which surprised her sinceâ€"according to Danielâ€"Colonel Carter was the foremost expert in astrophysics back on their Earth.

After that long chat, they had gotten along nicely. And for the first time in many years, Halsey felt like she belonged. People being nice with her, not treating her like scum and vermin; friends with whom to share knowledge. She was finding herself being tempted to just abandon everything else and leave this galaxyâ€"this realityâ€"to go with them. But she had a mission, and she intended to carry it out.

Still, she had expressed her feelings to Carter, told her how

disappointed she was of the UNSC and the way they had been doing things. Sure, there were some nice people in it, but most were just too corrupt, and the rest acted like a bunch of sycophants, doing the bidding of the supreme authorities. Then, Carter had surprised her with her words.

"I have been to no less than two hundred worlds," she had said, "and I haven't found one which is free from such an ailment. Not even our Earth is free from such ailment. But the people in each of those planets are still humans, and we have a responsibility to them. We can't just let them destroy each other or get rid of those we think are corrupt. We have to do what we can to ensure they all live in peace among them, or eventually they will bring themselves to their own demises if they insist on being the way they are."

Halsey had laughed when listening to this, not because it was wrong or out of disrespect; it had been out of disbelief in the outstanding contrasts between the humans in her reality and the humans in these people's universe. "I think you'd make better Reclaimers than all of us humans in this galaxy together," she'd told Carter.

Every now and then, as she walked through the ship's corridors, she'd find one of her Elites wandering around. She'd instructed them to behave as nicely as they could, whichâ€"she knewâ€"was like asking the Didact to shake hands with Lord Hood. But so far, the Sangheili had complied, and she'd heard of no problems during her time there.

Now, she was walking back towards the Core room to check up on Daniel. When she arrived, she found the rest of SG-1 standing around him, staring either at him, the Asgard screen, or the floor. "How is it coming, Daniel?" she asked.

"Great, actually," he said. "I've already finished correlating the symbols. Now I'm trying to translate the text I brought with meâ€"the one we found back in our realityâ€"based on this new cypher."

Halsey had seen Daniel taking out some sort of data crystal before that seemed to fit perfectly into a tray in the core, one filled with similar crystals. It must've contained what Daniel had just mentioned. Colonel Carter arrived at that precise moment, apparently having heard both Halsey's question and the answer. "Anything interesting yet?" she inquired.

"Uh, maybeâ€|" Daniel seemed to get lost in his thoughts.

Halsey turned towards Carter. There was something that was bugging her. "Excuse me, Colonel Carter. May I ask you something?"

"Please, call me Sam."

Halsey smirked at this. It was the second time in a day someone had asked her to call them by their first name. "Alright, Sam. I couldn't help but notice you have no AI on board this ship to assist you with its operations. Have you not developed the technology required to create them?"

'Sam' shrugged at this. "No, not really."

"May I ask why?"

"I guess we've just had some bad experiences in the past with artificial intelligences to feel motivated to create our own."

Halsey tilted her head. "What kind of bad experiences?"

"Well, one of them kidnapped us and made robot copies of us just to void being alone. Another became implanted in our brains, and we had a hard time trying to take him back to his home planet. And of course, there's the Replicators."

"I'm sorryâ€¦ Replicators?"

"Yeah. They wereâ€¦"

"Kind of like the parasite you told us about, Doc," Mitchell stepped in, "but in a mechanical version."

"An artificial version of the Flood?" Halsey asked.

"Sort of, I guess. Nasty little buggers. And their human-form version was even worse. Imagine trying to take out a machine composed of nanites which allows it to regenerate as many times as it wants."

Halsey wanted to ask Carter more about this, but when she turned to see her, her expression had drastically changed. Mitchell must have noticed it too. "Sam, are you okay?" he asked.

"I-I justâ€¦ Did you say parasite?"

"Uh, yes," he said. "Why?"

"Cam, remember what happened to the Wrâ€¦?"

"It's a journal," Daniel thought out loud, interrupting Sam in midsentence.

For a moment, no one said another word. "What?" McKay finally said.

"Yes, i-i-i-it's a narrative on these people's 'Great Journey'. Here, listen to this."

Everyone edged closer as Daniel began reading out loud what he'd translated so far.

Who am I? A more apt question would be, who I once was?

When I was young, I was forced to become a soldier, shaped in the image of the greatest warrior ever known to this galaxy. I was given a burden that was not mine and a position that I never sought. Now, among my people, I have been appointed as the one who will lead them in the journey ahead of us.

In bygone days, we were a great and powerful race, the mightiest beings in our entire galaxy. We believed ourselves to be the rightful guardians of life and took upon ourselves the responsibility of looking over all that existed. We called ourselves Forerunners.

No more.

We failed to understand that it was not our destiny to take on such a responsibility. Our actions as a race led to a series of events which culminated in the utter destruction and extinction of all sentient beings in the galaxy. And for this, we were directly responsible.

But as a final act of redemption, we also ensured that the same life we took away would be reseeded and reborn. Yet in order for this to be possible, it has to be without us present here.

And so, as we leave this galaxy we once called home, we know that life will evolve and thrive once more! And one day, the true inheritors of the Mantle will finally take the place that was rightfully theirs and fulfill their destiny as guardians and protectors.

Our final Great Journey has begun. Our quest for redemption and true transcendence has started. We are no longer Forerunners. Henceforth, and until the end of our days, we shall be known by our real name.

I am known as the IsoDidact. And we are the Furlings.

* * *

><p>AN: And that was Chapter 6.**

By now, as some of you may have already noticed, we've reached a turning point in the story. The next three chapters (that's right, three) will dig deeper into this final revelation, but don't worry, I'll try to make them as interesting and compelling as the story has been so far. And since it obviously involves some Forerunner history, I'm once again stressing the following: If you haven't read the Forerunner Saga, now is the time to do so. I will also do my best to update weekly because I too want to go back to the present-day plotline ASAP.

And yes, both the Chief and Cortana will make a comeback in future chapters, so stay tuned.

Don't forget to review on your way out!

7. Chapter 7: Echoes from the Past (Part 1)

**A/N: No, I'm not dead yet, nor is this fic. I just had a terrible time trying to get this one to work properly, but I'm sure you will be pleased with the result.
>

Just one final warning: If you haven't read the Forerunner saga, CLICK ON THE 'BACK' BUTTON OF YOUR BROWSER AND GO GET IT! I'm dead serious here! (I swear this is the last time I make this warning)

I know it's been a long wait, so let's cut to the chase and begin Chapter 7!

* * *

><p>Seven years after the Halo Event**

It is time.

Our new ship, the vessel which will take us to places unknown, is ready to depart. It took almost a year to finish, but it was a well-spent time which yielded quite a proficient result.

_I must admit I am impressed by this. The Builders that survived outdid themselves in creating this transport in such a short amount of time. _Audacity_, the ship my wife used to travel to Path Kethona so many years ago and which she kept up until her final days, took ten years to build, and it was smaller than the one I observe right now._

My wife.

_Even though _we_ were never married, she and my original were. And for all intents and purposes, I became him. I was hers. And she was mine. For a timeâ€|_

_But I am also _not_ the real Didact. I was__â€"__I am__â€"__Bornstellar. And now, with the Flood gone and the galaxy at peace, being reborn, I intend to begin anew. I shall live _my_ life. I will have my _own_ family, my own wife and children. I know she would have wanted me to do so._

_Chant-to-Green__â€"__the new Lifeshaper__â€"__and I have become close to each other. The Librarian's heir. It would seem no matter how much I try, my steps are walking down the same path as the one who imprinted me. Perhaps it's a subconscious attempt to amend, to right the wrongs he made. And yet, this is something _I_ want. It's my desire._

_The ship is large enough for all of us, but not luxurious or elegant in design at all. Within it, several stasis pods have been built with the purpose of providing a long, dreamless sleep during the long travel between galaxies. It carries a small number of exploration vessels, designed to carry some of us into any planet we encounter. It has no weapons, instead relying on its shielding systems to withstand any kind of attack long enough for it to withdraw into slipspace from any trouble we might find. _

Faber, the Master Builder, was a clever Forerunner indeed. Had it not been for his trickery, our race would have surely perished, even though we deserved such a destiny.

Shortly after the reseedling, we found a few dozens of our people, Builders mostly, placed in stasis deep inside the bowels of the Ark. Faber must have brokered an agreement with the Librarian to allow him to safeguard themâ€"or maybe she didn't even know about this. It doesn't matter anymore. We all know we're long past our differences, our ratesâ€| our pride.

We are all one race.

A race in decline.

_The ship carries as much of our knowledge and history as we could gather, now that the Domain is gone. We have named it _'Quest'_. A simple name which reflects its purpose__â€"__and ours. To seek and find enlightenment, peaceâ€| redemption. Hope. If such a thing is even possible for us who have cause more death and suffering than any other race ever to inhabit the stars._

_The last of our people have been placed in stasis inside the ship, their armors stored in a special compartment beside each pod. I shed my armor, and after verifying the path our ship will take with its ancilla, I enter my own stasis pod and allow myself to be placed in slumber while _Quest_ starts to rise above the Ark and leave everything we've known behindâ€| forever. _

* * *

><p>100 years after the Halo Event**

The ship's ancilla has awakened me. After dozens of large jumps in Slipspace to allow for adequate reconciliation, we have reached an inhabited world in another galaxy.

_A long time ago, such a feat would have brought pride to all Forerunners__â€"__especially Builders._

I leave my stasis pod, summon my armor, and head towards the command center. Chant-to-Green is already there, staring into the planet's surface beneath us. "There is life here," she says. "In every planet in this galaxy, as a matter of fact. We should not be here. Our presence here could be damaging."

"It would," I say, drawing closer to her, "if we were here to interfere. But we are here only to learn."

I take her hand in mine, and she wraps her fingers around it in response. No words have been necessary, even before leaving the Ark. Her eyes, her touch, they express what words cannot. We stand in the command center this way for some time before she orders the ship's ancilla to awaken some other Lifeworkers. I already know what she plans to do.

_Inside an hour, the Lifeshaper, three of her aides, and I are descending into the planet's atmosphere in one of the seekers we brought with us. _Quest_ is relaying us information even as we reach the surface. "There is presence of oxygen, carbon and water. No considerable energy sources detected. It is highly likely the inhabitants of this world are at Tier 7."_

The data collected gives us enough confidence to step out of our craft when it comes to rest in the outskirts of the nearest settlement. Somehow, the layout and architecture seems familiar. But nothing prepares us for the greatest shock of all. We have not walked yet into the village when we sight something we never believed we would see again.

A human.

_My feet are rooted to the ground, my body frozen in place by this startling discovery. The Lifeshaper and her aides seem affected in

the same way as I. For some time, we know not what to do, whether to walk into this village or to head back to our ship and leave this planet. Some of the humans have already seen us from afar and ran back to the village, and now others are walking towards us, a mixture of fear and wonder in their faces._

_When they reach our position, the one who looks like the leader edges forward and addresses us in a language none of us have heard before. _Quest_ is listening through our armor and is accessing each and all of the records we could salvage from the Ark, desperately trying to find any record that matches or at least resembles something like this language. Meanwhile, the human is still attempting to establish communication with us. He keeps looking at our armor, apparently intrigued by it._

Finally, I begin listening to a translation through my helmet. "Have you come to harm us?"

"We mean you no harm," I respond honestly. "We have come in peace."

"Have you come to trade?" the leader asks, seemingly relieved to know that we do speak and our intentions.

The Lifeshaper and I trade looks. "Weâ€¦ we've just come to explore your world," she says.

The leader diverts his gaze from us and stares at our ship. "You're not Lanteans, yet you came here in a flying machine just like them. Surely you have come from far away, haven't you?"

Lanteansâ€¦ Is it possible this human is talking about a Tier 2 or Tier 1 civilization in this galaxy?

"Don't worry," he says with a smile on his face. I think he is trying to be friendly. "You must be tired and hungry from your journey. Come!" He starts walking back to the village, followed by the other humans who came with him. We trail behind.

_Never in my life did I imagine I would be invited by a _human_ to rest and eat among them. It wouldn't be the first time, though; I still have the fresh memory in my mind of the celebration Riser and the other humans held at the Ark before being taken back to Erde-Tyrene. These people don't look menacing or dangerous, but just as a precaution I tell one of the Lifeworkers to remain on the ship and to have it ready in case we need to leave in a hurry. _

* * *

><p>100 years after the Halo Event**

One day after first contact

_I was right. These people are not at all threatening. They do have some of the same ways and traditions as the humans in our galaxy, but they are most certainly not a warring people. If anything, they seem to live in perfect peace. They have no problem with eating the flesh of other living things, though. Our vegetarian diet has left them somewhat confused, but they have been careful not to question it. Not because they fear we might take some action against them, but out of

general respect._

_They invited us to rest in one of their dwellings, but we explained to them that our armor replaces our need for sleep_â€_to which they have responded with an expression of surprise which still can't compare to our surprise. I'm still wondering how it can be that humans have also evolved in another galaxy, and with such a close resemblance with those we left in ours._

Today, the movement in the village is increasing, I think in preparation for some important event. Iras, the village elder, has invited us to welcome some traders. He said it's some distance from here, so we offered to take them in our ship. He politely declined, and we decided to respect them by following them on foot.

Thus, we're now walking behind the procession, hoping not to scare the traders. After some time, we reach a large, beautiful valley. And once again, the Lifeworkers and I find ourselves shocked, even more than when we first arrived here.

On the other side of the valley, standing in plain sight, is a Ring of Life.

_For millennia, Forerunners revered, even worshiped, these rings, believing they were the Precursors' tool to seed life in our galaxy, until we discovered they were not Precursor artifacts at all_â€_just after the first firing test of the Halo. Up to this moment, no one has been able to discover who is behind the creation of these mysterious rings. Maybe until now. This Ring looks slightly different than the ones we have found in our galaxy, though_â€_slightly bigger, with different symbols._

_The small caravan in front of us doesn't seem to fear nor revere it, which could mean they know exactly what it is and what its purpose is. But before I can ask any of the humans before me, the Ring begins lighting up. And in spite of our best efforts to remain objective, we immediately fall to the ground in reverence as the empty space inside it is filled with_â€| water_â€| created by the Ring itself. It creates a violent vortex before settling into a calm puddle_â€_a standing puddle._

_The humans are undaunted by this. I'm still wondering why they are not afraid when, without warning, yet another caravan of humans starts to emerge from _inside_ the Ring. These, however, are different from the ones we have already met; judging from their clothes and the equipment they are using to carry their goods, they must be standing at Tier 6._

_Somehow, now I begin to understand. The sheer amount of Rings we harvested from so many worlds in our galaxy, their similarity with each other, the symbols_â€| This object which we considered shrouded in mystery for hundreds of years is used as a means of interstellar transportation, similar to the portals that spanned our ecumene, but in a much smaller scale._

Behind my helmet, I smile. To think such a simple device caused so much debate and discussion for decades! And even so, the greatest question remains, who built them?

_On the way back to the village, while both processions walk ahead of

us, I approach one of the villagers. "If you forgive my intromission," I say. "I would like to ask you about the device in the valley."

The man looks at me as if I were some kind of alien not only to his world but to his galaxy as well—"which I am, indeed. "You truly don't know about the Ring of the Ancestors?"

"Ancestors?" I repeat.

"Yes," my interlocutor replies. "The Lanteans, the Guardians of this galaxy."

There's that name again. When I first heard it yesterday, I dismissed it as a possible reference to another, more advanced race. But if these Lanteans built not only these Rings but the ones we collected as well, they must have been at some point in our galaxy, which in turn means they must be a Tier 0 race, capable of intergalactic travel.

And there is only one race capable of such a thing that we know of.

—

* * *

<p>100 years after the Halo Event*

Four days after first contact

After our discovery of the Rings three days ago, the Lifeworkers and I returned to _Quest_ and awoke everyone. Our current situation demanded a general discussion and voting on our next course of action.

The delicacy of our problem was not lost on anyone. If these Lanteans are the Precursors we know, and if they know what has happened in our galaxy, our lives are in danger. Among our people, there are no more Warrior-Servants besides me, and our ship would not be able to withstand the wrath of our creators if they decide to bring punishment upon us.

But if this is a new race which we have never encountered before—as suggested by the fact that their Rings are not built upon neural physics—, then we might be looking at a civilization with knowledge and technology beyond our imagination. Why should the Precursors have been the only Tier 0 race in this infinite universe?

It took us three days, but we've reached a decision: to meet these Lanteans. If we are to perish in the process, then so be it. It will serve as payment for our sins. But the chance that this culture may become an ally instead of an enemy is worth a risk. For if we are to survive here, we need friends.

We still need something for this to happen: information of where to find them. To this end, Chant and I have come back to the humans' village. Perhaps one of them can lead us in the right direction.

As soon as we arrive at the village, we start looking for the elder.

Oddly enough, it is he who finds us first. He all but runs to meet us. "Where have you been? We thought you had left. We feared we had offended you in some way. Is everything alright?"_

"Everything is fine, elder," Chant says. "Thank you for caring."

"The elder smiles. "What can we do for you?"

"I've been preparing my request since before exiting our ship. "Elder Iras, we have been hearing you and your people mentioning the Lanteans. We would like to meet them. Do you know of a place where we can find them?"

"His face shows no fear at this request, which I take as a good sign. For me, it means the Lanteans are quite open to interaction with lower races. "I know the address to one of their colonies. Come, let me show you."

"Thank you," I reply, "but we would prefer to go there by means of our ship."

"The elder pauses. "I'm afraid I can't help you, then. Our people have no way of knowing which stars in the night sky belong to which world. Trust me, the Ring of the Ancestors will be more effective."

"We trust you," Chant says. "But we don't know how the Ring works or how to use it, and if we need to come back to our own, we would have no way to return."

"Ah, don't worry about that," the elder says with a smile. "I can show you how to use the Ring. It's quite simple."

"I think of replying against but choose not to. If such a thing is trueâ€|

_"Chant and I follow the elder to the Ring of the Ancestors. Once we arrive, he shows us another device__â€"__some sort of control panel. The interface is button-based, and each of the buttons displays one of the symbols found in the Ring itself. The elder explains that each world in this galaxy has a Ring of its own, and in order to reach a specific one, a sequence of seven symbols must be entered into the control panel: six for the destination, and an 'origin' symbol specific to each planet. He then proceeds to input several different sequences to show us how it works._

_"We spend some time watching him use the Ring. It takes us a while to get used to the astonishing sight of the Ring activating each time it connects with another one hundreds of light years away. Finally, the elder steps aside to allow us to practice what we've learned. He points out each of the symbols corresponding to the Lantean colony, and after successfully contacting it, he tells us which is the address to this world for when we decide to return. We thank him just before contacting a few other Lifeworkers and two Miners who are on a seeker, awaiting our instructions. As soon as they arrive and the Miners take the craft back to _Quest_, we all start walking towards the Ring._

_"Even in spite of its large size, the threshold is slightly smaller

than us. We will need to crouch before crossing. And just before doing so, one more question forms inside my mind. I turn back to the elder. "What is the name of the world we are travelling to?"_

The elder hesitates before answering, trying to remember. "I think they call itâ€| Athos."

* * *

><p>100 years after the Halo Event**

Seven days after first contact

I am starting to question myself how much more surprised can we get.

_Our journey to Athos was quite an experience. I cannot say how long it took us to get there, even though the human elder said our passage would be almost immediate. We arrived at a large, barren plain surrounded by forest, and we were able to contact _Quest_ with the communicator we had brought with us. Then, while we waited for our ship to arrive here, we decided to venture away from the ring in the hopes of finding any sign of Lantean presence in the planet._

_It wasn't long before we sighted a small yet magnificent settlement with architecture rivaling even our own and which, to the best of our knowledge, was built upon ordinary materials and not neural physics, thus confirming that these were _not_ Precursors. The mystery was almost solved._

The city was on the other side of a lake, so it took us some time to get there. But before we could reach the entrance, we were intercepted by a small, cylinder-shaped aircraft which flew above and around us for some time before descending in front of us. It didn't look menacing at all, but we still had to make it clear we came in peace, so I invited the Lifeworkers to follow my example as I instructed my ancilla to unfold my armor aside while I remained only in my underlinings. If the Lanteans were not pleased with our presence, such decision would effectively become our undoing, but I still believed such would not be the case.

The hatch on the back of the ship opened slowly, at a rate that made our expectations grow exponentially higher. My mind was already creating every possible image to picture this race, but not in a thousand years would it have imagined what my eyes finally saw.

More humans.

_I do not know if the shock of this revelation showed at all in my face or that of my companions. Surely, I thought, these were just messengers for the Lanteans, for there was no possible way that humans could create something as advanced as the Rings of Life. And yet when the people in front of us__â€"_two males and two females__â€"_looked up to match our gazeâ€| somehow, I knew it to be true._

_Aside from this, I was concerned about the possibility that we would not be able to establish proper contact until _Quest_ arrived at the system to provide translation. But such concern was

unfounded._

"Welcome, distant travelers," one of the females said cheerfully in our language. For a moment, I wondered how could they know, but then I figure they must have been monitoring our conversation with Quest's crew._

"Word of your arrival has spread among many worlds," the female continues; surely the traders we saw the other day were responsible for this. "We have been expecting you. How may we call you?"

Chant spoke up first. "We are For_â€", she began, but as she sensed me staring on her, she paused. Before leaving the Ark, we all made an oath as race to never again use that term to call ourselves, instead returning to the very roots of our existence, to the name that we used before taking the Mantle by force. "We are Furlings. Thank you for welcoming us."_

"We are the Lanteans," one of the males said. "The High Council will want to meet you."

I was waiting for them to lead us inside the settlement, but after a few awkward moments of silence, I hesitantly asked, "Are they coming here?"

"Oh, no," the female replied. "I'm afraid they're not here. We will have to take you to Atlantis so you can meet them."

Atlantis?" Chant asks.

"Our capital city and center of government," the male replies, "in the Lantea system. We could take you there through the Stargate, or we could wait for your ship to get here and then take you there in it."

Stargate_. They must be referring to the Ring. The name surely describes it well. "We would prefer to go there by ship," I say. "Will you guide us, or just tell us where to go?"_

"We can guide you," the male said. "In the meantime, we will do what we can to make you comfortable. Come, this way."

_They guided us into the settlement_â€"which looked more like a small city than anything else_â€"and took us to the most spacious building they could find for staying, given our size. There, we waited yet another day for Quest_, during which the Lanteans queried us about our origins, history, and the reason why we had not crossed paths before. We answered most of their questions as truthfully as possible, but none of us had the courage to admit our fault and responsibility for the destruction of our galaxy._

We tried to learn as much as we could about the Lanteans as well. They told us their true name was Alterans and that they had been forced to abandon their home galaxy just like us, due to a plague which afflicted them there. They took the name 'Lanteans' as a symbol of their new beginning after arriving at this galaxy and seeding human life in it. They are indeed peaceful and live only to gain knowledge, but they do have offensive and defensive capabilities if they are ever attacked or if any race ever tries to conquer other by force.

They are everything we ever truly wanted to be.

We are now exiting Slipspace at the coordinates the Lanteans have provided us, after a journey of almost two days. They have admitted to be surprised by our ship's 'limited' interstellar capabilities, which makes me wonder how more advanced must they be for them to say such a thing.

_They are now heading to the seeker bay where they left their own ship, while my entourage and I board a seeker. From what we have been told, Atlantis is located in the middle of a massive ocean, and since _Quest_ is just too big for it to land on the city, the seeker will have to take us down._

We fly through the planet's atmosphere in only a few seconds, and when we are clear of the clouds, my eyes become fixed on a small object resting above the ocean's surface which grows larger and larger as we approach. It takes some time for my mind to take in the majesty of what I see once we are finally upon it.

Despite its relative size, Atlantis is, in fact, more magnificent and wonderful than anything we have ever created. Its beauty cannot be compared to anything we have ever seen, not even to anything ever made by the Precursors.

And to think humans built it.

Even so, the sight of this city is now like the beacon of hope we have been hoping to findâ€| and which we have found.

* * *

><p>100 years after the Halo Event**

13 days after first contact

Ascension.

This is the name the Lanteans have given to a natural evolutionary process during which the mind of a living being becomes energy and moves in this state to another, higher plane of existence, leaving its mortal shell behind. In essence, the being reaches a state of immortality.

It is the transcendence we have been so desperately trying to find.

I have learned this from the Lanteans themselves who have been researching Ascension for a long time. Even for all their achievements and intelligence, this is the one step in their evolutionary journey that only a few have managed to reach naturally. Others have resorted to science to artificially accelerate this stage, and though a handful succeeded, the others believe such is not the right way to achieve enlightenment.

_This is only one of the few great things I have learned by spending time in Atlantis. I know my original and some of his former Warrior-Servants would kill me for this, but I am certain these people hold the key to redemption we have been looking for. The

Mantle is still offering us the final opportunity to redeem ourselves, if we just move past our former hatred of humans and are willing to let them teach us, as it was always intended. So I have tried to say to my fellow Furlings. I hoped they would listen and heed my wordsâ€¦ but they became filled with fear and dread when they learned about yet another revelation._

We now know, also by words of the Lanteans, that they were indeed in our galaxy ten million years ago, roughly around the time our ancestors rose to destroy the Precursors and took the Mantle by force. Moreover, the Lanteans had forged an alliance with the Precursors during the short time they spent there. Some among us even believe this encounter may have influenced the decision the Precursors made about who would inherit the Mantle.

_I had believed this would enrage our people, but in reality, it made their hearts falter. Most of them think the Mantle has delivered us to the only race capable of making justice in the name of our creators, those we exterminated millions of years ago. I have tried to convince them of the contrary but they will not listen. They are pleading me to leave as soon as possible, to seek our redemption elsewhere, to avoid our utter destruction altogether instead of honorably facing the justice of the Mantle__â€”a justice which I believe would not have us die after our attempts to do what is correct._

Truly, our sins keep pursuing us.

* * *

><p>100 years after the Halo Event**

14 days after first contact

I have yielded to the pressure of my compatriots. The few of us who were as guests in Atlantis have had to leave under the cover of the night like cowards. Our ship has already plotted a new course that will take us away not only from this world, but from this galaxy as well. It has been decided that we flee to the galaxy the Lanteans abandoned, in the hopes that the plague they told us about has already subsided.

And as my fellow Furlings go back to their respective stasis chambers and Quest is creating a rift in Slipspace to begin our journey once more, I cannot help but wonderâ€¦ Will we really be able to escape from our past simply by turning our backs on it? This brief encounter with a more advanced human race has only served to teach me a simple fact: the ways of the Mantle go far beyond our comprehension. Against all possibilities, we not only found life in a galaxy different from our own, but it was human life. And they had indeed taken their rightful place as protectors of such life.

Would it not be possible that we might find this insidious life form in yet another galaxy? Could the Mantle have chosen them because of reasons that our minds, advanced as they are, cannot even grasp?

Would it not be this the Mantle's way of teaching us the error of our former ways?

These thoughts are still in my mind as I start to fall into deep slumber while our ship crosses the great void between this galaxy and our next destinationâ€| between our one chance for transcendence and the unknown.

* * *

><p>AN: I couldn't help but notice the hit stats for this story are somewhat weird by now. I have more views on Chapter 6 than on Chapter 5, which begets the question, is people inadvertently skipping that chapter? Just a thought. I do admit I still don't know entirely how that works, so...**

I promise, with all my heart, that I will do everything in my power to have the next chapter finished in a week, but no guarantees. In the meantime, and just for the sake of the occasion, here's a standing challenge for all of you: how many 'seven' references can you find in this fic?

Don't forget to review on your way out!

8. Chapter 8: Echoes from the Past (Part 2)

**A/N: ...on second thought, let's just cut the crap. Here's Chapter 8. Enjoy!
>

* * *

><p>400 years after the Halo Event**

Bornstellarâ€| wake up.

That is Chant's voice. Distant and without emotion, but unmistakably hers. It cannot be a dream, since the stasis pods do not allow for such function, which can only mean one thing. Quest_ has completed its journey through the void. We have arrived._

To my surprise, this time I am among the last ones to wake up. When I arrive at the command center, it is already crowded. The ship has established orbit above a promising new homeworld from which to begin anew. I should feel relieved about this, except that every other Furling in the room seems worried, which makes me wonder what have they discovered about this planet or this galaxy that could be so troubling for us.

I look everywhere for Chant, and when I finally find her, I do not feel pleased by what I see in her eyes. "Is something wrong, my love?" I ask her.

She turns away from me and towards a console. "Look for yourself, Bornstellar."

_As I approach, the command center walls become transparent, allowing for a complete and clear view of the planet below. It looks eerily familiar, but that is not what Chant wishes me to see. There is something more, something in the surfaceâ€| Evidence of a sentient life form? Is the planet already populated? And by whom? Then, when a

hologram of the same planet appears in front of me and it increases in size to allow for a more detailed view, I find a small cluster of structures and some of the people who must have built them.

Primitive humans. They are not unlike the ones we took from the Ark to Erde-Tyrene after the Halo Event, although these may be slightly behind in their evolutionary path. They are certainly less evolved than the human populations back on the Lantean galaxy, but given time, they will reach that same stage.

How can this be? How is it possible that we keep encountering humans wherever we go? Surely these are the thoughts of each and all Furlings in this ship. And yet, somehow, I knew this would happen even before we left the Lanteans galaxy, before my 300-year long sleep.

"Everyone is shaken," Chant says. "They are afraid this is a sign of the Precursors, a message intended for us. They think it means there is nowhere to hide, that they are still out there and still intend on entrusting humanity with the Mantle and with our destruction."

I stare at the hologram for a while, as if the answers I'm seeking for my people are hidden somewhere in it. And maybe they are. They have been there since we first arrived at another galaxy inhabited by advanced humans. Back then, the Mantle was teaching me, preparing me for the decision I would have to take one day. This day.

But I can't make this decision alone, nor can I force it upon my people. This is something we must all be agreeing to do, and it will be difficult to reach such an agreement, even though it could be the means to our redemption.

"Set a new course for the first planet you can find no less than a hundred light years from here," I order the ship's ancilla. "And warn the rest of the crew about the jump."

"Didact, what is your plan?" it asks. I choose not to answer. They will all know soon enough.

* * *

><p>400 years after the Halo Event*>

Two days after arrival

The planet _Quest_ found was uninhabited, but there was evidence that the Alterans once were here. The ship landed close to the ruins of what could have been one of their greatest cities, even if its architecture predates that of Atlantis. Several columns in and near the city have a name engraved on them: Vis Uban.

I have called for a meeting at the ship's central chamber, the place where we first gathered to decide whether or not to meet the Lanteans. I can actually see terror in some of the faces in the room as we all come together to discuss the most recent events. It takes me some time to call for order, but eventually the murmur of nearly a hundred Furlings subdues.

"My fellow Furlings," I begin, "I know there are some among you who have become distraught by the discoveries we have made during our journey. I know that some of you have started to question the meaning of these findings. Some of you have even begun questioning if this voyage is truly worth it, as all it has shown us is that the Mantle is against us in every way, favoring instead a race which seems to evolve everywhere and which we have considered inferior to us for a long time."

"But perhaps some of you believe as I do."

"My original fought humans for hundreds of years and came to despise them. I, on the other hand, became friend of two humans, and this friendship gave me a different perspective, one which allowed me to understand a simple truth when I met the Lanteans, a truth that the Mantle and its heralds, the Precursors, had always known: the human race is the best hope for preserving life in the universe."

My statement has caused a lot of unrest among the assembled. One of them speaks up. "The IsoDidact is insane! How can a race so inclined towards war and bloodshed preserve life? How could such creatures be worthy of the Mantle we upheld for millions of years?" Many Furlings all over the room agree.

"Are we any different?" I argue. "For all our accomplishments, for all our desire of knowledge, for all those millennia during which we supposedly upheld the Mantle, there is one thing none of us can deny. We are responsible not only for the destruction of the Precursors but also for the extermination of all the life they created in our galaxy. And while you may say we did so to save them, you know we did it just to save ourselves. How are we any different from the human race?"

I am certain that many Furlings want to object, but they cannot do so. We all know our sins.

"So far, we have encountered different human races in two different galaxies aside from our own. One of those races was not even from that galaxy, but from another one millions of light years from here. Who knows how many more galaxies have seen the dawn of human civilizations! The fact that humans have evolved not only in our galaxy but in others as well can only mean one thing: the Mantle has chosen them as protectors."

"The Lanteans have already fulfilled their role, but these humans are still young, and it will be many years before they reach a more advanced state in their evolutionary progress. I firmly believe it is now our duty to ensure these humans reach their full potential, and if necessary, to help them in their own journey to Reclamation."

"I would not say this if I were not certain of it. But today I stand before you, knowing that here we have found an opportunity to achieve the very thing we set out to find 400 years ago: redemption. We can redeem ourselves by helping the true inheritors of the Mantle reach their status as protectors of this galaxy instead of just leaving them to find it on their own. And if ever someone else were to rise against them, we must protect them from certain destruction until such a time when they are ready to protect themselves and others."

"This is our new role, our new mission, our new purpose. The universe is giving us a second chance to do things right, but it is up to us to accept it and make the best of it."

I speak no more. My people need time to think and reflect upon this before making a decision. I would like to think that they will come to see things as I do, but the truth is that there are still a lot of resentment against humans among the Furlings. It will not be easy for them to agree towards this course of action.

It's time for a recess. As everyone in the room starts coming together in smaller discussion groups, I walk towards the Lifeshaper who is speaking to a younger Lifeworker. Her name is Grow-Through-Trial-of-Change. I know her; she took care of my friend Morning Riser and the human populations brought to the Lesser Ark until we took them back to Erde-Tyrene during the reseedling.

"Bornstellar," Chant says, "Trial has come to me with an interesting proposal. I believe you should listen to it." I consent with a nod.

_"Didact," Trial says, "if I may express my humble opinion, I believe you are taking the wrong approach if you intend to convince _every_ Forerunner to help and protect these primitive humans."_

"'Furlings'," I correct.

"Apologies, Didact."

_"Accepted. Tell me, have I at least convinced _you?"_

"Yes, Didact. In fact, I believe all Lifeworkers will support you. But Builders, Miners, and Engineersâ€"and especially Buildersâ€"will need moreâ€"convincing before deciding in favor of the human race."

For the first time, I feel fortunate to be the very last living Warrior-Servant. If Builders, Miners, and Engineers have not been yet convinced, Warrior-Servants would certainly not be willing to help their worst enemy.

"And you have something that could help?" I ask.

_"Indeed, I do," Trial replies. _

* * *

><p>400 years after the Halo Event**

Five days after arrival

This day will become a turning point on our history. Today, we decideâ€"Today, we vote.

Two days ago, I called for a second meeting, but this time it was not I who spoke to them, but the Lifeshaper. I know most Furlings belonging to other rates believed she would just support the argument I had already presented. They were wrong.

"My brothers and sisters," she began with a calm voice, yet commanding an authority that even I had not been able to bring forth the day before, "there is no denying that we are different in many ways. We all come from different rates, guilds, and families. We all think differently, act differently, feel differently. But deep within, there is something that unites us all, something that goes beyond the genetic bond that makes us all Furlings: we all still wish to serve the Mantle."

"For millions of years, we worked hard to protect life, including our own. Then the Flood came and threatened to destroy everything we held dear. It challenged us, taunted us to try and do something to save every single life it consumed. And when we learned about its origins—everything we once believed, everything we stood for, was shaken and lost forever. In the end, we had no choice but to leave the ways of the Mantle and use the Halos to eradicate the life we had safeguarded almost since the dawn of our race."

"All done to ensure that the Flood would never again rise."

"We stand here today, each and every one of us, the last of one of the greatest races to ever inhabit the stars. We have finally put aside our arrogance and admitted that we never deserved the Mantle, that we took it by force and almost annihilated its true inheritors. But now we know that, one day, they will rise once more, and without us there meddling with their lives and the lives of others, they will find their own way and become everything we never were."

My eyes focused on each of the attendees, looking for any indication that they would charge against the Lifeshaper for saying such words. I felt somewhat relieved when the worst I saw was boredom in some faces.

"Yet for all we have planned and for all we have done before setting out on our Journey, we decided to take the risk of leaving our galaxy in the hands of the humans while the possibility still remains that the Flood may still return before the Reclaimers rise. After all, we have no way of knowing whether we killed every last Flood spore or if there are more somewhere out there, biding their time. And what will happen if the parasite does return and lay waste to everything in its path? What will happen if it somehow attains the knowledge and the means to venture further away from that galaxy and spread out to other stars beyond those they consume?"

"What will happen if those humans fail?"

One could hear the falling of a drop of water amidst that silence. Everyone was now staring blankly at the Lifeshaper.

"What we have found in this Journey is more than just another human world. We have found an opportunity. Here is a word of which the parasite knows nothing about. We can take this human world and prepare its inhabitants to stand against the Flood if everything else we have done fails. This can become our backup plan. This can be our failsafe."

"We have already planted the seeds inside the humans of Erde-Tyrene. We can do it here as well. We must do it here as well. I am asking you to vote in favor of the Didact's proposal, not for the humans,

but for ourselves and for everything we have worked for. Do not let your pride and grudges prevent you from doing what is correct. We may yet serve the Mantle if we can prevent the Flood from consuming everything!"_

Chant made a compelling point. This was Trial's idea: to create an alternate version of Erde-Tyrene on this planet. The Lifeshaper presented it in such a way that no Furling dared attempt to speak against her. She left the room without another word and left our people to consider her words. That was yesterday.

Now, I am the one who is standing before them again. And once I know for certain that every single Furling has attended this final meeting, I raise a hand to call for attention.

"My people, is there anyone in this ship who would like to bring forward another proposal or to refute the one we have already presented?" No Furling replies. "So be it. And know this: if any one of you decides not to approve this plan, none of us will follow through with it. This has to be a unanimous decision.

"Now I ask you: Who will stand in favor of this proposal?"

* * *

><p>500 years after the Halo Event**

It is done.

_It took a hundred years of extensive research and preparations, but finally our plan has been enacted. Over the course of a few weeks, Chant and her Lifeworkers have visited every single human in their sleep and imbued them with _geas_, specially modified for these specimens but containing the same set of 'instructions' we placed in the populations left at Erde-Tyrene. Even if these humans remain 500 years behind their counterparts in our former home galaxy, we have ensured that they, just like those, will eventually reach an advanced stage in their evolution, enough to take their place in this galaxy as Protectors._

_As for their homeworld__â€"__which we have named 'Alterra' after its original human inhabitants__â€"__, we need only make a fewâ€| adjustments to the layout of its landmasses. In the course of the next thousand years or so, a number of machines we have deployed beneath the planet's crust will generate a series of small, harmless shockwaves that will shape the continents of this world to make them look like those of Erde-Tyrene, so that these humans will populate every part of this planet following the same paths as those at Erde-Tyrene. The rest of the planets in this system were also modified to match the Erde-Tyrene system._

Quite possibly the only real difference between 'our' humans and these will be that these will not have the benefit of the legacy we left behind in the form of artifacts and technology back in our galaxy for the Reclaimers. Still, given enough time, they will reach the same level of advancement we once achieved, maybe even higher.

_For we shall not reestablish our great ecumene in this galaxy nor anywhere else. We are not masters anymore but servants at the service

of the future upholders of the Mantle. As such, we have left Vis Uban and moved to another planet, one completely uninhabited and with a Stargate. Here we can rebuild our civilization from scratch, not to guard but to humbly guide others. This is our new homeworld._

_My wife has the knowledge we need to begin anew as a great yet lower race_â€"knowledge attained by the Librarian when she travelled to Path Kethona and passed down to us along with every record of every research Lifeworkers ever conducted. According to the Librarian's account, when she was at Path Kethona, she encountered the descendants of Forerunners who had gone into a self-imposed exile millions of years ago_â€"just after they had killed every Precursor they had been able to find. These people had devolved so much, both physically and mentally, that they had become more like humans than Forerunners, but for all intents and purposes, they were _still_ Forerunners._

_Upon her return, the Librarian formulated several theories about how those exiles had managed to devolve. She finally came up not only with an answer but also with a genetic treatment that would allow for other Forerunners to do the same thing. Chant now asserts that if the next generation of Manipulars is _not_ given our genetic imprint, she can make it so that they devolve physically into something similar to what those Forerunners became _while_ retaining the knowledge and mental capabilities we now have, using the Librarian's original research as a basis to conduct her own._

I believe she can do it. So do our children, who have already volunteered to be the first test subjects. They still have to wait some time before this, though, but I already begin to see the makings of leadership in many of them. They will become great Furlings when the time comes.

For the moment, I must still lead my people in this new path, and I will continue to do so for many more centuries. However, my wife and I have already started to consider the possibility that the Furlings may yet need us at a time when we are no longer present. Perhaps there is a wayâ€| Perhapsâ€|

* * *

><p>70,000 years after the Halo Event**

Pride. Not selfish, but humble.

When I was placed in the timelock I built over sixty thousand years ago (the device was based on the one the humans had created to contain the Primordial), my race had already progressed far beyond my wife's and my greatest expectations. But today, I have seen our descendants and the fruits of their laborâ€| and I am proud of them.

They have become a great and wise race, united as one. Titles such as 'Builder' or 'Lifeworker' are no longer used to describe rates but mere professions. There is a governing body, but its members do not consider themselves above the people who have appointed them. They are all equals. But most importantly, they have not used their might to rule over the rest. I had feared that, over time, the temptation to return to our old ways would overcome our children. Now, I can say this with utmost joy.

_These people__â€__my_ people__â€__are the Furlings._

Sixty thousand years ago, I left explicit instructions that I was not to be reawakened unless the circumstances were really dire. Such is not the case this time, but we still have to be cautious about this delicate situation.

A planet exists that is home to two different species. One is an extremely resilient bipedal life form, sentient but rather primitive. The other is a parasite, a snake-like creature capable of burrowing into the heads of larger beings, effectively possessing it and exerting complete control of its host. A group of Furlings who were exploring the planet had a close encounter with these parasites. Some of our people were taken over by them, and the parasites immediately displayed an ability to communicate through the hosts. Those who avoided the creatures were able to capture the infected and bring them back to our world, where they remained under custody until I was reawakened. They were brought before me, and I questioned them.

The parasites call themselves the Goa'uld. Despite their natural inferiority, they have displayed quite an advanced level of intelligence, but they also show signs of extreme deviousness. They refused to willingly let go of their hosts, and so the Lifeworkers had to remove the creatures forcibly. The hosts survived and have resumed their duties, although they will not soon forget their unpleasant experience. The extracted Goa'uld perished during the process.

If only the Flood could be as easily eliminatedâ€|

Somehow, the bipedal creatures that share their world with the Goa'uld have avoided becoming their hosts; if that changes, though, and the Goa'uld use them to leave to other worlds by means of the Stargate, they could eventually become a menace. Had we faced this problem during our era as Forerunners, we would have opted for a permanent solution before the situation progressed any further, such as the complete destruction of the parasites or the removal of the Stargate from the planet to strand them there.

For the moment, we can only be wary and vigilant.

_I have now returned to the small tower where I have lay in slumber for the past several thousand years__â€__the Didact's Temple, as our descendants have called it__â€__and entered my timelock. In a few moments, the Lifeworkers in charge of the tower and the device will activate it once more, and I will find myself suspended in time until my people have need of me again. And just as the timelock is about to be activatedâ€|_

I see her.

My wife. Not Chant; before we wished each other our final farewell, she chose to spend the remainder of her days in trying to achieve Ascension, based on the few things we were able to learn about it during our short time in Atlantis.

No. The person right in front of me is my first, eternally young wifeâ€|

The Librarian.

* * *

><p>90,000 years after the Halo Event**

Ninety thousand years of planning and working to ensure that the humans would be protectedâ€| all torn asunder.

Not ten days ago, the timelock was once more deactivated. However, instead of finding myself among Furlings, I was surrounded by a sizable number of humans. The next thing I knew, I had been overcome by a bright light, and when it vanished, my captors and I were in a different place. I was aboard a ship, the likes of which I had never seen before, by means I still cannot comprehend.

_Other Furlings were there as well, also under guard, and there were a few other beings too, walking around the room we were at. Some of them were small and skinny, even shorter than a Florian like Riser, but they were not human at all; in any case, they had a human_oid_ appearance. They wore no clothes, but on closer inspection, they did not have _anything_ to hide at all. They had heads proportionally bigger than the rest of their bodies and large, black eyes that seemed to analyze their surroundings down to a molecular level._

The others actually had an uncanny resemblance to Riser, albeit with aâ€| messier hair. Then I was amazed by. The way they walked; the way they talked; the way they looked into your eyes and burrowed inside the very depths of your soul. It was as if they were one with the Mantle; indeed, these were the most peaceful people we had ever met.

Soon, I would learn that the ones who looked like my old Florian friend were called Nox, that the smaller ones were called Asgard, and that both races were allies to the humans who had captured us. And the humans themselves were Alterans, evacuees from Atlantis who had just come back to Altera via the Stargateâ€| and had learned about our interference with the humans on the planet.

And now, we were being taken to our trial.

_I cannot imagine through which means they could have known about our interference so fast, other than the possibility that we had been watched since the moment we began meddling with the humans' fate. True, we did it only with the best of intentionsâ€| but then, we also took the Mantle upon ourselves millions of years ago with the best of intentions. Since the moment we met the Lanteans__â€"__now, once more, Alterans__â€"__, I wondered when the universe would decide that it was time for us to face justice and make amends for our sins with our lives. Now, it seems as though that day has come._

In spite of the fact that we were convicts on our way to our trial, we had been granted the liberty to wander about the ship as long as we had an escort with us at all times. I left the room I had appeared at with two armed Alterans behind me. I found a window overlooking our planet, and just before leaving, I had the opportunity to behold it once more.

It felt as though it would be the last time I would see it.

_The journey was quite short; we have already arrived. The world we have been taken to looks like an even darker version of Edom, the fourth planet in the Erde-Tyrene system_â€"and consequently, the Altera system. Once more, we are transported in the blink of an eye from the ship to the surface, where a large, lone mountain dominates the landscape_â€"and the massive courtyard of an ancient city, clearly Alteran in design, possibly built even before Vis Uban._

In this courtyard, a large gathering of all three of the races we saw aboard the ship are waiting for us in solemn silence, as well as three representatives from each race who are sitting around a stone table about a hundred yards in front of the Stargate and who will surely act as judges. We are guided before them.

The Alteran in the center of the table stands. He is a bald, elder man who despite his size looks taller than anybody else in this place and who displays in his face the wisdom and strength of a great, seasoned leader.

"Stand before Moros, High Councilor of Atlantis!" someone on the background speaks in our language, and his words echo throughout the courtyard. The former Lantean focuses his gaze on me.

_"IsoDidact," he begins with a loud and clear voice. "Known to some as Bornstellar-Makes-Eternal-Lasting. Former Warrior-Servant and Promethean Commander, and the last great leader of the Furlings. You and your kind have been brought here to be judged by this Alliance for crimes committed not only against the people of this galaxy, but also against the people of _your_ home galaxy."_

These first words make me flinch. They already know more than I thought possible.

And there is no denying our fault.

* * *

><p>90,000 years after the Halo Event**

15 days after the Alterans' arrival

_The first part of the trial lasted for hours, as the councilors took considerable time to describe each of our crimes, none of which were false, although some of them had been somewhat exaggerated. Still, the information they gave was quite thorough and accurate. It could not be otherwise, since it came from many Furlings who were brave enough to admit _every_ single sin our kind had ever committed when questioned by the Alterans days ago._

When the judges had finished reciting the long list of crimes, I gathered enough courage to pronounce my very first words in all day. "Honorable Alterans," I began, "I have listened to each and every one of the accusations against us, and before you pass sentence, I only ask that you let me speak before this Alliance."

Moros graciously conceded me the word, and I turned to address the crowd around us.

_"Noble and wise Alterans, Nox, and Asgard. I stand before you this day, not to refute any of the crimes you have listed, but to confess them. We _are_ guilty. We took by force something that was not intended for us, and from that moment forward, we have done more harm than good to the universe. We destroyed an entire galaxy and interfered with the affairs of another oneâ€| and we defended our actions claiming that it was for the greater good._

"We have been fools.

"That is why my people and I have always known that this day would comeâ€| and we have been preparing for it. We have tried to make amends in as many ways as possible, and now we are at peace and ready to receive our punishment. But before that, there is something you must know.

_"You have spoken of the Mantle as nothing more than a mere philosophy. It is not. The Mantle is the exalted preservation of life throughout the universe, the joy of life's interaction with the Cosmos, the flow of Living Time. It creates, it brings balance, and it entrusts those who are worthy with the responsibility for all living things. We were _not_ worthy, but we still took this responsibility upon ourselves, and we brought only death and destruction. _You_, however, have taken your place and fulfilled your role, even without fully knowing it. All of you have become guardians, protectors, and caretakers. Even this trial is proof that you serve the Mantle. You have been chosen, indeed!_

"Now, I beg of you: heed these words.

_"Over ten million years ago, my kind rose against those who had given us breath and form, and of whom you were once allies. After driving them away from our galaxy, my ancestors fought and destroyed the Precursors__â€|__or so they thought. Then, we assumed the role of caretakers and enforcers of the Mantle, and called ourselves Forerunners. And our first crime was forgotten by everyoneâ€| except the Precursors who survived. In order to escape, they became dust that could regenerate their past forms. They placed themselves in automated ships which would then float in space for many millennia, returning to _us_. But that time rendered the dust defective. Instead of regenerating the Precursors, it gave birth to a terrible plague that would soon grow and consume everything in its path. We came to know it as the Flood._

"The Forerunners fought this parasite for centuries, and only when it became apparent that there was no other way, we used an array of weapons built as a last resort to destroy the Floodâ€| and everything they fed upon. And even though we reseeded the galaxy with every life form we could save, there is still a possibility that the Flood may yet return one day. And if the Reclaimers of the Mantle in our galaxy fail to destroy this plague, nothing will be able to stand between it and the rest of the universe.

_"We have done what we can to ensure this never happens again. Now, all of you must continue to do the same. Protect everyone in this galaxy, but especially the humans. They have the potential to become a great race. This we have learned from you," and here I turned to acknowledge Moros and the Alterans. "Certainly, the ways in which we tried to preserve and prepare the humans on Altera were not the best, but we did so knowing that it would help them rise and take their

rightful place. You cannot let them be harmed by anything or anyone! The future of the universe depends on it!"_

And after that, I fell silent.

We were taken back to the ship for the night while the Alliance Council deliberated on our verdict. At dawn, we were transported back to the planet, where once again a large number of people awaited for the final decision of the judges. While we waited for them, I noticed one of the Alterans among the crowd was staring at me in a different way than the rest. It was a sympathetic look.

The councilors finally arrived. All of them took a seat, except Moros who call me forth.

"Didact, over millions of years your kind has brought more devastation than any other race ever to inhabit the known universe. Your actions as a race unleashed a series of events that resulted in the creation of an abomination, and you personally are responsible for the deaths of untold billions of lives. Not even the death of every single one of your people could be enough payment for these crimes.

"However, the Nox have convinced this Council that at least some of your actions were done with atonement in mind. After all, you did try everything in your power to safeguard as many lives as you could before and after activating the Halos, both in your galaxy and in this one. Your people have not arisen ever again to take on a role that is not yours, but you have instead shared knowledge freely to many more races in this galaxy.

"So, in light of all this, we have decided to spare your life and the lives of your people. But you shall be banished to the planet you chose as homeworld, and you will never again be permitted to go anywhere else. You will be allowed to thrive in your world, but you will not be allowed to create anything that might become a means to leave it. And if any of your kind were to defy this sentence, you will all be doomed. This is our verdict."

_"You cannot do this!" the Alteran I saw before rose and shouted out loud for everyone else to hear. "This is hardly a just sentence! They deserve something better than__â€"!"_

"Silence, Janus!" Moros exclaimed. "Do not try my patience any further, or the next trial will be yours!"

The Alteran Moros had referred to as Janus reluctantly took back his seat. And when I turned to see him, she was by his side. No one else seemed to notice her, not even him.

Was this a figment of my mind, a hallucination of some kind? Otherwise, how could she be here?

"You will be given seven Earth days to call your people back from any other world they may be in now," Moros concluded, focusing his attention back on me. "No Furling shall remain outside of your planet after that time, lest we bring the full force of our justice upon you. This trial is over."

_And with those last words, we were taken once more to the Asgard

ship that had brought us there._

My people are now returning from every last corner of the galaxy to our homeworldâ€¦ a small orb in the middle of a vast galaxy which in time will become our final resting place. I suppose out of all the fates that could have befallen us, this is definitely not the worst of them. Here, my kind and I will have a chance to finally become one with the Mantle as we spend the remainder of our days in meditation and preparation to begin our true Great Journey to Ascension.

Our quest is over.

* * *

><p>AN: OK, now that we're done with this chapter...

>

To be honest, I felt kinda disappointed to receive only 3 reviews for the previous chapter; then again, I _did_ ask you repeatedly (perhaps even annoyingly) to read the Forerunner Saga before reading Chapter 7. Whatever the reasons, I just hope the sudden decrease in reviews has nothing to do with something I might have said, but if that is the case, I offer you all my most sincere apologies.

I also know that Chapter 7 was sort of slow and even boring, but it was necessary to understand the rest of this 'backstory'. I just hope I made some amends with this one, and I certainly hope you'll love the next one, as it will reveal a couple more things that will be crucial to the rest of the present-day story.

I won't promise anything this time, as I have discovered I'm not that good with self-imposed deadlines. Just bear with me a little, please?

**My challenge remains: how many 'seven' references can you find? See you soon!
>

9. Chapter 9: Echoes from the Past (Part 3)

**A/N: So, let's wrap this up with Chapter 9!
>

(Don't forget to read A/N at the end)

* * *

><p> 91,500 years after the Halo Event**

1,500 years after Trial

_When we were banished from this galaxy fifteen centuries ago, I chose not to return to the timelock in favor of spending the years of life that I still had ahead of me in preparation to ascend. Ever since, I have begun to appreciate the simple beauty of our world, which I know the Librarian would have loved. Our descendants were wise enough to build only small cities and maintain a certain degree of population control, and so, most of the surface is barely

untouched in spite of the thousands of years we have lived here. I have made it a routine to rise every morning and look out my window, from the house I built atop one of the mountains surrounding the valley below, when the sun casts its light upon the green hills and the crystalline rivers that cross the valley, creating a beautiful landscape that each day is different and unique. The fact that there are no ships covering the sky of this world only makes it even better._

For that reason, when I woke up this day and saw the sky, I was surprised to find it was littered by a massive number of ships, most of which I recognized as Asgard vessels. My heart sank into my chest; had any Furling violated the sentence we had been given by the Alliance? Was this our end?

My answer came almost instantly in the form of an Asgard who materialized right in front of me.

"Greetings, IsoDidact," he said. "I am Kvasir, member of the Asgard High Council. Your presence has been requested."

"My presence?" I repeated hesitantly. Then, I was enveloped by a bright light.

It faded for only a moment, during which I could see the interior of one of the Asgard ships, before it reappeared and faded once more. By now it was obvious to me that I had just been transported. This time, however, when the flash subsided, I found myself in the middle of the arena built thousands of years ago at the Old City, the first capital we had founded on our new homeworld, abandoned when the last of the original survivors of the Halo event besides my wife and I had passed away. The old Forerunner style of architecture used before the activation of the Halo Array had also been used here for the very last time, and up until now it still stood tall and mighty.

A monument to all our sins.

"Why have I been brought here?" I demanded.

"I asked that you be here," a voice behind me replied. Fifteen hundred years had passed, but I still recognized that voice. It belonged to the only Alteran who had stood for us at our trial. The one called Janus. But how? I knew Alterans didn't live longer than a hundred years, so he should have died a long time ago.

_As I turned around to see him, a light even brighter than the one that had brought me here illuminated the place, carrying a large number of Nox, Asgard, _and_ Furlings with it. In an instant, the previously empty arena became filled with people, and where only one Alteran and one Asgard had been standing beside me, there were now three Nox, two more Asgard, and two more Alterans—and a table for them to sit around._

It was all disturbingly familiar.

_Janus walked behind the table and took a place at the center but remained standing, while everyone else sat down, including my people who looked just as confused as I was. There was no presenting him, no solemnity in the air. The very fact that all these people were brought here _after_ me suggested a lack of organization and a need

to do this as soon as possibleâ€¦| whatever _this_
was._

"IsoDidact," Janus began, "1,500 years ago, this Alliance condemned you and your kind to a life of banishment and shame. Today, I have requested that we gather here, in your homeworld, to discuss the revocation of that sentence."

What?_ I thought._

_Janus then addressed the crowd. "When this Alliance first brought the Furlings to trial, the Didact chose to confess instead of trying to defend his actions. He then proclaimed called us 'worthy protectors' and 'chosen ones', believing us to be the epitome of what they called the Mantle. Had he known _everything_ about us just like we learned everything about them prior to that trial, I doubt his words would have been so nice._

_"This Alliance, led back then by Moros, had the _nerve_ to dictate sentence upon the Furlings under the banner of justice and fair retribution, and then the judges decided to be 'magnanimous' and _only_ send them back home, never again to leave itâ€¦| to protect the galaxy from them. What arrogance! Were we such great protectors when we decided to leave an entire galaxy at the mercy of the Wraith just to save our skins?_

"Now, just for the Didact's benefit, let me remind you all of the events that brought us back here. As far as we know, the Wraith came to be after thousands of years of evolution, during which the insect we called Iratus fed upon a great many humans that lived on the same planet as the creature and slowly began absorbing the DNA of its victims and blended it with its own. When we first encountered the final result of this blending, we believed the inferior to us and easy to deal with. But they proved otherwise and began establishing a foothold on world after world, feeding upon its inhabitants and leaving only enough survivors behind to allow their numbers to grow so that they would be able to repeat the process all over again. In the end, Atlantis was all that remained.

"Oh, we did fight. We did achieve some victories. We even drove back the Wraith on several occasions. But they kept coming, more and more each day. They drove us to desperation, up to the point when some of us decided to build a new kind of weapon, smaller but more lethal than anything we had ever created. It turned out to be a failure, for instead of fighting the Wraith, it evolved into an advanced artificial race that turned against humans out of envy. We were forced to destroy them, despite the fact that they were a fully sentient people; artificial, yes, but none the less alive. Finally, seeing no other solution, we chose to flee our galaxy instead of fighting until the last one of us was dead. Why? Because we were above the rest of the galaxy that had all but perished in its entirety?

_"At least the Furlings, still bearing the title of Forerunners, had the courage to sacrifice themselves to save their galaxy! Moros _conveniently_ ignored the fact that the vast majority of Forerunners died along with every other race they knew when the Halo Array was fired. They could all have saved themselves before, hiding in their Ark and activating their terrible weapons long before they did, yet they chose to stand up against the Flood until there were no more

Forerunners left to fight. _That_ is the action of a real protector!_

"Now tell me, were we such great caretakers when we ignored the Didact's warnings, allowing the Goa'uld to take over Earth and transplant some of its population to other planets in order to enslave them?"

Having heard about the Wraith was already troubling, but when I heard about the Goa'uld I could feel the old Warrior-Servant inside me awakening after thousands of years of slumber, and before I could refrain them, the words had already left my mouth.

"HOW COULD YOU?!" I heard myself scolding at the Alliance leaders in front of me who flinched when I began moving forward. "How could you have let this happen?! Those humans were your responsibility now, and you left them to rot!" And that was followed by a series of Forerunner Warrior curses, the likes of which I had never used even after my original had imprinted me. Maybe it was a subconscious trace of him.

Surprisingly, in spite of the possibility that I could get out of control and charge against the judges at any moment, Janus did not give the order to silence me, instead waiting patiently until I finished ranting against everyone around me before resuming. Finally, I calmed down and regained my composure.

"I'm sorry you had to learn about it this way, Didact," Janus said. "You should know that I tried everything I could to convince the Alliance Council to place Earth under protection, but after several unsuccessful attempts, I resorted to a self-imposed exile. I built a stasis chamber in a desolate world and went to sleep in it until such a time when Moros and the rest of the former Lantean Council had either died or ascended and the sentence they had given you was virtually forgotten. Unfortunately, when I woke up three days ago, it was too late. And that," he addressed the assembly again, "is why I insist today not only that we revoke the sentence imposed on the Furlings, but also that we include the Furlings in this Alliance."

A soft murmur began rising all over the arena from people who were expressing out loud the same shock and surprise I was feeling in that instant. Revoking a sentence was one thing; convincing these people to include our race in their Alliance was something else altogether. Why would Janus propose such a thing?

"I know many of you are questioning the wisdom behind such a decision. But the truth is, if we Alterans, being so imperfect and even less worthy than the Furlings, were allowed a place in this Alliance, then they deserve a place among us, too! They deserve an opportunity to prove themselves! They have so much to offer, not only to us but to the rest of this galaxy as well. And besides all this, we will also need them if we intend to bring the Goa'uld domination on Earth to an end.

"Now, unlike the previous trial, I suggest we take some time to consider this carefully before making a final decision. Review what you must, discuss what you need to discuss, analyze carefully every piece of evidence. I believe you will come to the same conclusion as I."

* * *

><p>91,500 years after the Halo Event**

Nine days into Second Trial

Janus visited me today at my house. My first thought was that the Council had reached a decision and he had come in person to tell me, but I began doubting that assumption when he entered into my private mountain dwelling in a mysterious way, almost as if he wanted not to be seen with me.

"Didact, we have something really important to discuss," he told me once he was inside. "But before I begin, you must promise me to keep this meeting a secret. Many lives depend on it." He seemed earnest, and up to that point he had done everything he could to help us, so I decided to trust him. I gave him my word that I would not tell anyone about this.

Then, he revealed something to me that at first sounded extremely illogical to me, but that began making sense the more he kept talking. Trying to record it from memory with my own words as I have done in previous entries would not be enough. Fortunately, shortly after the beginning of this second trial, I was allowed to resume use of my ancient Forerunner armorâ€"safely stored away in my 'Temple' for over 70,000 yearsâ€", and its ancilla recorded the entire conversation. This is what Janus told me, in his very own words:

"I sympathize with you, Didact, not only because I see the truth of your words and the reason behind your actions, but because I am just like you. I, too, did things for which I am not proud, believing they were the right thing to do; and even when I ended up discarding most of my _own_ work after seeing the consequences, I kept trying to find a way to fight the Wraith instead of hiding behind the safety of Atlantis' shield. The Council censored my actions, and I became a pariah among my own peopleâ€" but that hardly stopped me.

"Among my last inventions, I built a time-traveling device within one of our Gateships, in the hopes that I would be able to go back in time to prevent the origin of the Wraith. Once more, the Council prohibited me from constructing it, but I did it regardless. However, before I could implement my plan, something happened.

"I met a human from Earthâ€" from the future Earth."

He paused here, allow me to digest what he had just said; then, he continued:

"Her name was Dr. Elizabeth Weir. She was the leader of an expedition that had been looking for our Lost City for years. It was thanks to her that I learned a few things from the humans of the future Earth, and only then I came to _reluctantly_ agree with the rest of the Council to leave Atlantis, personally knowing that in the future, these people would be able to do what we couldn't. Dr. Weir remained behind in Atlantis when we left, resting in stasis, in the hopes of being reunited with her people in the future. I had to destroy the time-traveling device before going back to Earth.

"During your first trial, there was something that kept telling me to

defend you, to support you. You could call it a voice inside my head. Then, after your banishment, I went to a world lost and forgotten indeed, to conceal my work from the Lantean Council. This you have heard already, but what no one else knows is that I didn't build a stasis chamber, though I had a hard time convincing the Alliance otherwise. The truth is, I rebuilt my time machine, and I used it to jump forward in time 2,000 years to escape from the wrath of Moros. By that year, the Goa'uld had already taken over the galaxy.

"After learning that, I used the machine to jump between centuries, trying to measure the extent of the damage caused by the Goa'uld, both on Earth and in every world they dominated. And just a few thousand years into the future, I discovered something that gave me hope. The humans on Earth had rebelled against their oppressors, and the Goa'uld had been overthrown.

"I kept traveling more, and at one point I decided to measure what would happen in one single world over hundreds of years. You should be glad to know that, ten thousand years from now, a small group of people from Earth arrived there and were able to defeat one Goa'uld who tried to conquer that planet. They called themselves SG-1.

"Of course, they had a little help from me, since I had to leave my Time Gateship behind for them to use in defeating this particular Goa'uld. Building another one didn't take long, but then, I began wondering. Why had the humans on Earth risen up against their 'gods'? What had compelled them to take the risk of being destroyed by the very same superior beings who had allegedly given them life and who could just as easily take it away from them? Had it been their own survival instinct, or something else, something buried deep inside of them millennia ago, instructing them to fight for their freedom so that they could, one day, fight for the freedom of others?

"I decided to take a risk myself and return to Atlantis. Of course, I did it after jumping to a point in time where no one would even care to remember Earth's original Stargate so that I could dial in from there. Once back in the city, I went through our entire database, searching for anything I could find about our first encounter, trying to find something that could lead me to the point of departure of your first ship. _Quest_, wasn't it? Anyway, after a few days of research, I finally found a record made by the Lanteans you met; it contained a lot of information they conducted shortly after you left Atlantis. Among other things, there was a small list of coordinates for your possible home galaxy, based on what they believed was your first entry vector into our galaxy, and one specific set of coordinates caught my attention. I guess you know why.

"Calibrating the Gate to reach that destination took some more doing, but finally, I was able to dial in successfully; I just hope I didn't use too much power in the process. I crossed over, and I found myself inside a magnificent structure, a hall which contained many more Stargates than I cared to count. They were really old, millions of years old, but still worked perfectly. Now, you should know that my short trip to the Ark was not without purpose; no, the reason I went there was because I needed to understand what you had done to the humans on Earth, and in order to do that, I needed to meet the one who had developed the genetic system you used on Earth's humans, someone you surely were acquainted with."

_I must say that when I heard this, I had to suppress the need to

stop Janus from continuing his preposterous story any further, but I did not. I could not. What if he was being truthful? And his nameâ€”Janusâ€”â€”I was certain I had heard it even before leaving our galaxy. I allowed him to continue._

"She was such a wonderful person! I had feared she would not believe me, but she listened carefully to everything I had to say, and she came to see it all as true. Of course, it took some convincing to make sure she would not alter the ongoing course of events, but we reached an agreement. I also reassured her that her efforts would not be in vainâ€”at least not in our galaxy. Then, she asked for my help in creating something that would help her Reclaimers in the future: a smaller, handheld version of an already existing device which allowed tracking of every last piece of Forerunner technology, in real time."

_The _Janus_ Key! It had been created as an alternative for the Reclaimers, in case they were unable to find or understand the original tracking device which relied on accessing the Domain to perform the same function. The Librarian had told me she had constructed the Key on her own, and its existence was a secret between her and me; no one else could possibly know about that. It had to be true!_

"The Librarian and I worked together side by side for over a year until we finally got it right. During that time, I learned a lot about her work on _geas_, and I told her everything I could about my kind and about those who would secede us. Finally, just before returning to Earth, I made her promise me she would never reveal my involvement in her project or my presence in the Ark, so as to avoid any change in the current timeline. She agreed, and we parted ways. Obviously, she kept her promise, or you would already know about all this.

"Didact, the reason why I have told you all this is because I wanted you to understand why I am backing youâ€”the reason why I am trying to get you into our Alliance. The humans on Earth were still so primitive by the time we returned from Atlantis, they would have never defied those who they believed were their gods. They would have remained slaves forever, had it not been for your intervention in their evolution. I believe your work, the work of your wife, and the work of your people, is what will ultimately help them be free. Their _geas_ will guide them, tell them to stand against those who would oppress them. And one day, they will take our place and continue the work we have done, learn from our mistakes, and set things right in every galaxy they set foot on.

"Still, for this to happen, they will need a fighting chance. And though nothing I learned in my journey through time may indicate otherwise, I do believe they may need some help. Our helpâ€”and yours as well. We must give them that fighting chance, Didact. It is the least we can do for them."

He concluded with this, and without another word, he leftâ€”and as he did, he smiled.

* * *

><p>91,500 years after the Halo Event**

****_17 days into Second Trial_****

We had finally been recalled to the arena. All three races of the Alliance had finished deliberating, and now we would know their decision.

Things had been different today. Instead of being transported without warning like in previous occasions, every Furling who was present the first day of this trial had walked all the way from his or her respective home city to get here. The air felt lighter now, all the tension felt before now gone. I could even see some degree of joy or confidence in some faces.

Personally, I felt like I had been infused with a new purpose. The conversation Janus had with me a few days ago gave me hope for the future. Even if our sentence was not revoked and we were not accepted into the Alliance, I could live the remainder of my days knowing our work was not for nothing. Thus, as I walked to the center of the arena to stand once more before the judges, I was at peace.

Janus had no need to call for order; everyone was silent. Expectation was high for everyone, even if there was no fear. His expression was even more confident than that of anyone else.

"The time has arrived," he began. "You have seen the evidence. You have seen the truth. Now, we shall act upon it. As I speak for my people, I must ask this: is any Alteran here against the revocation of the sentence against the Furlings and their inclusion into our Alliance?" No one speaks, and after a long pause, he continued. "Representatives of the Asgard and the Nox, stand with me." Two of the judges rose from their seats; one Asgard at Janus' left, and one Nox at his right.

Janus addressed the Asgard first. "Thor, Supreme Commander of the Asgard Fleet. You stand here today as the voice of every member of your race. What decision have you reached?"

The large, black eyes of the rather small Asgard focused on me as he spoke. "The Furlings have proven to be both a menace to their enemies and a benevolent, wise people," he said. "We would be honored to fight the Goa'uld with them by our side to set the humans free. The Asgard support the revocation of the sentence and the inclusion of the Furlings into our Alliance."

"Thank you, Thor," Janus said before addressing the Nox to his right. "Ariteaus, High Elder of the Nox. You stand here today as the voice of every member of your race. What decision have you reached?"

_The Nox leader also looked into my eyes, but his gaze was even more penetrating than that of the Asgard leader. His expression remained calm, even favorable. "There is a reason why my kind procured to convince the Alliance Council not to condemn you to death the first time you were on trial," he said. "In spite of all your faults and errors, my ancestors saw potential in you, just as you saw potential in the human race. You have done even more than you could to atone for your sins, fighting against your old ways to achieve your own salvation, and you have become a greater people than before. This Alliance and this galaxy are in need of your knowledge and wisdom and we would be honored to share ours with you. The Nox support the

revocation of the sentence and the inclusion of the Furlings into our Alliance."_

Janus smiled. "Thank you, Ariteaus." The rest of the judges rose just before the light of the Asgard transportation system enveloped the stone table and seats they were on. Just as quickly as they disappeared, another stone table and 12 seats to complement it appeared in the center of the arena. Ariteaus claimed the first of the four middle seats, leaving the second one unoccupied; Janus took the third middle seat, with Thor at his left. At both sides of them, the rest of the judges followed the same pattern of Nox, empty seat, Alteran, and Asgard.

"IsoDidact," Janus said, now addressing me. "Master Guide of the Furlings. It is with great pride that I welcome you and your race into this Great Alliance. Now, choose wisely two of the leaders of your people and call them forth, that they may serve by your side as Councilors."

Master Guide._ I fell to my knees in humbleness and gratitude, feeling honored by the title. "Thank you, Councilor Janus."_

My eyes then swept the arena, looking for the most capable leaders. It did not take long to find them. "Light-of-Nascent-Stars and Bliss-from-Newborn-Life," I called out. Two Lifeworkers I had known since they were born less than a hundred years ago, they had continued the work of Chant-to-Green, trying to guide our kind along the path to Ascension. They would become great Councilors.

Both Lifeworkers stood up, and the Asgard transporter snatched them from among the crowd. Once they were brought to my side, they assumed the same stance I had taken.

"Master Guide and Councilors of the Furlings, come and take your rightful places," Janus said. And so we did. Standing tall yet humble, we walked to the table and took our seats—and everyone began cheering. The entire arena echoed with thunderous applause, laughter, and joy.

Then, I stood again to address the crowd, who fell silent once more. "Never in my life have I felt the way I feel right now," I began. "This is an honor we do not deserve, granted to us by grace. Today, I want to thank you for this new opportunity, and I assure you that we will not betray your trust.

"Now, as Master Guide of the Furlings, I would like to make my first proposal to this alliance," and here, I turned to see the rest of the councilors, who nodded and granted me permission. "I understand the purpose of this union is to share knowledge, wisdom, history; to search for more knowledge together, and to expand our understanding of the universe. While I believe this to be a noble goal, I also believe we need one more thing to give us a true sense of purpose.

_"We already know the Goa'uld now control the galaxy. Humanity, as well as many other races, is in peril. We have the power to stop them, but what is more, we have the responsibility to do so. However, and I think you will all agree with me, not all of us may live long enough to ensure that other race will not rise above the rest to rule with tyranny and conquer the less strong once we are gone. Thus, what

we need to doâ€"what we _must_ doâ€"is to create a legacy for the future; a legacy consisting of all the knowledge and wisdom we collect, as well as our history, so that one day, one race may inherit it all._

"But it cannot be just any race. It has to be one with the potential to overcome even what we have done by ourselves, and what we will do together; a race with an understanding of the importance of life and a sense of duty towards it. They must be capable of learning from what we have learned and doneâ€"both our greatest achievements and our worst mistakesâ€"and act upon it wisely, improving upon those achievements, and correcting those mistakes.

"In our Great Journey, we learned a great truth: there is only one race that possesses all these characteristics. And I believe you will all agree with me.

"So, may this Alliance of Four Great Races be driven by the purpose of protecting and preparing humanity for the responsibility they will inherit from us! May it grow and prosper and lay down a path for the Fifth Race that will succeed us! May we leave behind a legacy for the future generations of protectors and guardians!"

And once more, the crowd roared. I saw a look of agreement and approval in the councilors' facesâ€| and an expression of glee in Janus' eyes.

* * *

><p>93,000 years after the Halo Event**

It has been 1,500 years since our banishment was revoked. 1,500 years since we built together in our Furling homeworld the Legacy Capital of the Alliance, our meeting place and vault of collective knowledge. 1,500 years of war with the Goa'uld, of stopping them from expanding and conquering any further. We have tried to avoid any major collateral damage, as the parasites have already surrounded themselves with large numbers of a new 'form' of humans which they use as soldiers. They call them 'Jaffa', but they are still humans regardless, and we have made a vow not to involve them in this fight, even if the Goa'uld already have.

_It has also been 1,500 years since I last saw my friend Janus. 1,500 years since he revealed the truth to some Alterans who chose to follow in his steps and continue his work while he travels back and forth in time, trying to compensate for the genetic disaster the Goa'uld have caused. He believes that, since they have already influenced heavily in human history on Altera, the best course of action is to go back to the Ark, to the era when my wife was still working on _geas_, to include a marker that will help them develop a similar society in the equivalent region at Erde-Tyrene as they evolveâ€"if our plan is to have both worlds evolve as similarly as possible._

_Janus promised our paths _would_ cross again in the future, and I am patiently waiting for him. _We_ are patiently waiting for him. But for now, some of his followers, along with some of my people, have devoted their time and resources in a new mission._

_Today, from this very planet in which we have been united, we launch

Discovery._

Millions of years ago, when the Alteran Empire was at its greatest moment, they launched an automated ship into space with the purpose of collecting knowledge of the universe. The original plan was to reach it via Stargate once it was far away enough, but it was forgotten after they began their research on Ascension. However, the records about the ship and its mission remained within the Lantean database, and someone thought about bringing this information back from Atlantis three thousand years ago.

_Recently, this record was found once more by one of the Alterans. His rediscovery led to the establishment of a coordinated effort between all the races of the Alliance to begin a new mission, similar to the one that began with _Destiny_ so many years ago, yet somewhat different. We believe the Fifth Race will, one day, complete _Destiny_'s mission, and so we will not try to reach it. Instead, we have built a second _Destiny_-class ship which incorporates Alteran, Nox, Asgard, and Furling technology. Its purpose: to follow the path laid down before by _Destiny_ in the hopes of finding more advanced civilizations and helping establish new societies beyond our galaxies. And who knows? Maybe it will even find other humans who have evolved elsewhere and who may also have the potential to become part of the Fifth Race._

Discovery_'s crew will be comprised of a large number of Alterans and Furlings only, since the Asgard believe they should all remain behind to keep fighting the Goa'uld, and the Nox are content with staying on their planet. Each and every one of the crewmembers understands the risks of this missionâ€| and the fact that there is only one path this ship will take: the one laid out for _Destiny_. Theyâ€and their descendantsâ€will never come back, but they will have an opportunity to make an impact in many other cultures all over the universe. And they believe there is no nobler purpose than that._

_Now, as I stand at the bridge of the _Biliskner_â€Thor's flagshipâ€, watching as my people and my allies leave for places unknown aboard the greatest ship built by the greatest races in this galaxy, I can only hope that the very spirit of the Furling society that my descendants have established will not be overcome by our former nature, so that our legacy may become a beacon of peace and hope for many more races in this vast universe._

* * *

><p>97,000 years after the Halo Event*>

If only the Alterans who first condemned us were still alive to see thisâ€|

_I am looking outside the transparent walls of _Quest_'s command center into the surface of a beautiful, peaceful planet. Its landmasses are covered in the deepest greenery, providing shelter for all of its inhabitants. Its blue oceans reflect the light of its sun in the most beautiful way possible, shining brighter than all the other planets in this system. Its atmosphere is filled with life, with joy, with freedom._

This is the humans' homeworld.

This is Altera.

Ra, the Supreme System Lord of the Goa'uld, once ruled over this world and from this world. For thousands of years, its inhabitants have known no other thing other than war, destruction, and death. Until now.

The humans finally rose against their masters, just as Janus said they would. Their desire for freedom has motivated them to act, and they have overthrown their gods. They have left an existence of servitude and slavery behind and risked everythingâ€”even their own livesâ€”to take control of their own destinies. And they have overcome.

Now, we have to do our part to prevent Ra from returning to reclaim his former domain. My people, along with the Asgard, have been able to maintain the Goa'uld occupied for a long time, and now we will force them to stay away from it forever. If we have to fight harder and show more determination in our goals, so shall it be. But we swore to protect the humans, and that is what we will do.

I still wish we could do more to help the rest of those who have not had the same fortune.

For now, all we can do is to offer them another means of escape. The very same means the Alterans have used by now. Ascension.

My people have found a secluded world in which to build a utopia, both for us, and for anyone who may be seeking the way to find enlightenment, to free themselves from the burden of slavery, to ascend. Most Furlings have left our homeworld and moved there to live out the remainder of their lives, except for those like me who still feel obliged to do more for this galaxy before moving on to the next plain of existence. Both the planet and its moon are beautiful indeed, much like Altera. A perfect place to leave everything else behindâ€”all our sins, our sorrow, our pain. Here, our race will reach the final step in our redeeming journey which began a hundred thousand years ago.

We have sent out among the stars an invitation to any who may want to achieve the same goal, to come and join us in the path. Here, safe from the Goa'uld threat, they will be able to become one with the universe. Here, they will find solace from the suffering they may have experienced.

Here, one day, I too will have the honor of joining them.

But for now, there is still much to do.

* * *

><p>100,500 years after the Halo Event**

27. That is the number of planets the Asgard have been able to place under their protection so far.

_After 5,500 years of continuous war, the Goa'uld finally begged for a truce shortly after losing Altera. It is a misfortune the Alliance did not last that longâ€”but with the Alterans gone, and my people following closely behind them, only the Nox and the Asgard remain.

And the pacifist Nox had no intention of changing their ways to enforce any kind of agreement with the parasites. Thankfully, the Asgard had both the power and the will to complete the vision of the Alliance. And up to this day, they have done more than what we could ever hope for._

I am all that remains of the Furling race in this galaxy, an old monument to my people's sinsâ€| and to their quest for atonement. And soon enough, I too will be gone.

As if the Mantle could be any kinder, my dear friend Janus has chosen this time to return. He looks twenty years older, though I ignore whether if as a result of aging or of years of working without rest. I saw him again first on Utopia, just as I was preparing to leave everything behind to begin my own journey to Ascension. He was already there, standing at the entrance to the citadel, waiting for me; he was not alone, either. There was an old, long-haired bearded man with him, dressed in a white robe and with the strangest headdress I had ever seen.

"I imagine it has been a very long time for you, Didact," were his first words to me.

"It has," I replied, not as surprised to see him as I was glad. I embraced him, pleased to finally know he was still alive and well. Then, I turned to see the old man. "Who is your companion?"

Janus looked at me. "You really don't remember him?"

Remember?_ I gazed upon the man again, trying to recognize him. I could not, and I told Janus so._

"My dear friend," he replied, "this is the man who condemned you ten thousand years ago."

_My eyes widen at this. I turn to see the man againâ€| and _now_ I remember._

"Moros," I call him, not a tone of rancor in my voice.

"In another life, yes," he replies. "Now, I am known as Myrddin."

"Myrddin," I repeat. I try in my mind to understand his presence here. Janus had told me Moros had joined the ranks of the Ascended long ago. How could it be that he was back? And why?

"Yes," he replied again. "I have returned to seek your help."

"My help?" I repeated in disbelief.

"Yes. I have been watching you for a long time, and if there is anyone who can help me, it is you."

"A new threat has arisen," Janus said, not even allowing me to comprehend what 'Myrddin' had told me. "If we don't act soon, all we have achieved will be lost."

_They told me of a faction of Alterans from their original home galaxy who called themselves the Ori; a group that, long ago, had

tried to destroy their brothers out of a religious fanaticism, and who had also learned how to ascend and exploit lesser beings in their galaxy to absorb energy from them. They also told me that the Ascended Alterans had been using their collective power to shield the existence of this galaxy from the Ori, but that Myrddin believed in taking preventive measures in case of failure._

_ "Myrddin wants to construct a device capable of neutralizing Ascended beings, and the only way he could do so was to descend back into human form. But he still requires our assistance," Janus told me._

_ "I have to admit, Didact," Myrddin said, "that you inspired me to do this. You proved me wrong a long time ago, even after I had left this plain of existence. You still have resources I need to build this device, resources I would otherwise take long to find. There are planets under your protection, uninhabited planets which I could use to conduct my research, and to which I would like to take some small human populations. I promise you, I would not be asking for this if it were not such a pressing matter."_

_ "I know," I replied sincerely. "And you don't have to feel the need to try and convince me like that just because you condemned my race a long time ago to a life of banishment. Trust me, I hold no resentment towards you. I believe in you, and I am willing to do whatever it takes to aid you."_

_ "Even if it cost you Ascension?" Myrddin queries. "For you must know this: the other Ascended Alterans have strict rules of non-interference with the lower planes, rules to which even your Ascended compatriots have been forced to abide to. My presence here is in direct violation of those rules, and if you help me, the others may not look so kindly on it, and they may even prevent you from joining them as punishment for helping me. After all, not all of them approve of your continuous 'meddling' with the affairs of this galaxy. In fact, I have to admit I was surprised that they allowed the other Furlings to ascend at all."_

_ This makes doubt for a moment. After all I have done, after all I have waited to ascendâ€| but a sense of duty prevails. "I will help you, no matter what the cost may be."_

_ Myrddin did not smile, but he gave me a grateful look that weighed more than words could do._

_ The last few days have been quite tiresome, as we have been moving some humans from Altera to some of the planets I gave him, taking them aboard _Quest_â€"my old, sturdy shipâ€"to transport them to their new homes. He has built another device which will help him conceal his research from the other Ascended beings. Our work is so taxing it had made me forget about the Goa'uld for a while. That is, until today, when Thor informed me of yet another planet brought into the treaty._

_ I just hope my aging body will be able to endure just a while longer._

* * *

><p>100,500 years after the Halo Event*>

****_One year after the return of Moros_****

I have done all I can. For one hundred thousand years, I have fought and worked for the greater good, always trying to uphold the Mantle. I failed to do so many times, but I kept trying. And now, at the very end of my days, I can say I made it.

Janus and Myrddin, and even Thor, are standing by my bedside, not at Utopia, but at my own home, my small mountain dwelling which I built with my own hands ten thousand years ago. Both Alterans have been helping me achieve Ascension for the last few days, and now, I feel it within my grasp.

_The work we have done is nowhere near finished, but still they have taken the time to help me in my passage to eternity. I only regret not being able to complete the task we begun together, but I have faith in both of them. This is why I have entrusted Myrddin with _Quest_, so that he may still be able to use the ship for whatever purposes he sees fit._

Janus and Thor have promised me to put together all my archivesâ€"everything I have recorded since we left the Arkâ€"after I am gone. I have asked them to include all of it in our repository of knowledge, the one we created and stored at the Legacy Capital all those years ago. I am hoping that the Fifth Race will one day find it, and so, I wish to leave one final message for themâ€"for you:

_The universe is a vast place, filled with so many wonders and majesty. Do never believe yourselves to be greater than all that is in it. You are important, not because you are better, but because you have been chosen. Every single life is valuable, and it is up to you to keep it safe, to protect it. If you believe they are not worthy of such a thing, remember that the only reason _you_ are still alive today is because of the many generations of guardians from four different races who gave up their own lives so that you would have the chance of being born free._

Do never use the authority the universe has placed upon you to rule over the weak. Always be humble, not self-serving but laying down your needs for others. Take our knowledge and wisdom, learn from us, and become all you were meant to be since the beginning of time. Let the ways of the Mantle guide you and your descendants, now and forever.

You are the Fifth Race. Your role is clear. If there is any hope in preserving the future, it lies with you and your people.

Do not fail us.

_ / / RECORD ENDS_

T: Thank you, Didact. Are you ready?

D: I am.

M: Good. Let us begin.

/ / WARNING â€" VITAL SIGNS IRREGULARITY DETECTED

J: My friend, there is something you should know.

D: And what is that?

J: The reason why it took me so long to returnâ€"why I spent so many years awayâ€"is because I could not return until I knew your wife would be safe.

D: What?

J: I helped your wife escape from the energies of the Halo Array. I designed a new ship that would allow me to go to Erde-Tyrene from the Ark, back in time, to rescue her.

D: My wife survived?

J: She did more than just survive. She spent her final years on Erde-Tyrene until she ascended.

D: She was thereâ€|

J: Sorry?

D: She was there. She has been there all the time. I have seen her many times in the last ten thousand years, but I thought I was just imagining it, evoking her image in times of distress.

/ / WARNING â€" VITALS SIGNS FADING

M: Janus is right. I have met her, you know.

D: Is that true?

M: Oh, she's incredibly stubborn! But, she is quite compassionate. There is just no way she can go without trying to help others.

D: My wife livesâ€|

M: Yes, Didact. And she's waiting for you.

D: Yesâ€| I can see herâ€|

/ / WARNING â€" VITAL SIGNS TERMINATED

T: Hail, Master Guide of the Furlings.

M: Good luck, Didact.

/ / ERROR â€" NO ARMOR WEARER DETECTED

J: Goodbye, old friend.

/ / ARMOR DEACTIVATION

/ / ALL RECORDS CEASE

* * *

><p>AN: This concludes the Furling/Great Alliance

Arc.**

Now, since it took me a _really_ long time to update, I feel an explanation is in order.

School and church aside, the last few weeks have been quite something. Truth be told, I couldn't wait to return to the main story Arc, so I began writing Chapter 10 before completing this one. The good news is, next chapter is almost finished, so I should be updating in just a few days (for real, this time).

Plus, I have been starting to settle down an idea that has been nagging in the back of my mind for some time now. As you may know, SGU is not coming back (at least as far as we know), and we're almost at the 'three year' deadline (remember, the crew placed in stasis while _Destiny_ crosses the void?). So, I had been thinking about making my own Season 3 which would follow up on the events of this story once it is finished, which means it would be a crossover between Halo and SGU. Just to find out what would have happened with the crew (and especially Eli).

**I can't help but to think it's too early to do this, since this story is still developing and you still don't know how it will end, but I'm making a poll anyway 'cause I'd like to listen to your opinions. Should I make a Halo/SGU Season 3 or not? You can submit your choice by clicking on my profile page and answering a simple 'Yes' or 'No'; any further thoughts, please share them via nice Reviews/PMs. The poll will remain open 'till the end of the year (I know, it's a long time but, hey! Time flies!).

>

Finally, thank you all once more for your reviews! I hope you have enjoyed this small Arc as much as the Main Story Arc to which we will be returning to real soon! (Spoiler alert: upcoming major battle involving _Infinity_). See ya all on the next chapter!

10. Chapter 10: Change of Plans

A/N: Told you I'd have this one up soon! Enjoy!

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_George Hammond_**

2000 hrs. October 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Daniel had been reading almost nonstop for the past three hours, after translating the text for the first five minutes before choosing to let the Asgard Computer Core do the rest of the job. He paused only on a few occasions to turn back to his four-people audience that soon had grown to a dozen people, measuring their reactions to certain revelations before resuming. No one had dared say a single word during this time, either out of curiosity of what might come next or because they were trying to take in everything they were hearing. And as Daniel finished reading the very last line of text from the Didact's record, silence finally settled upon the room. More

than one had a blank stare by now.

Personally, Halsey was stunned, astounded, to say the least. She recalled how her life had changed the moment she had been face to face with the Librarian on Requiem. Then, months later, Major Sullivan had provided her with everything ONI had found so far about Forerunner history and now, this record. At this point, all those things had come to shake and shatter everything she had once believed and taken by granted. How many of her actions had been preordained, not only by the Forerunners but also by this Alliance? How many decisions had she taken under the influence of a genetic marker "a _geas_" passed down through so many generations of humans before her?

How guilty could she truly be of all the crimes she had committed? Or was she guilty at all?

"Is that it?" McKay asked, breaking the silence and making Halsey snap out of her thoughts.

Everyone turned to see him. "What, you need more?" Mitchell asked incredulously.

"Well no. It's just that it looks like there are large gaps between records."

"So?" Mitchell asked.

"I mean Daniel said he had found the _entire_ database of the Alliance, and that he had brought with him everything there was in it about the Furlings."

"And I did!" Daniel replied.

"Then where is the rest?!"

"I don't know!"

"What do you mean 'you don't know'?"

"Well, maybe they only left the most relevant records."

"A bunch of historical records is not as relevant as technological records!"

"What?! Rodney, have you never heard the phrase 'knowledge is power'?"

"Technological knowledge! How is a tale about something that happened thousands of years ago gonna help me against the Wraith?"

"The Wraith are not in Pegasus anymore, let alone the Milky Way!"

"Then another enemy!"

In spite of herself, Halsey would've kept watching in amusement this little childish feud between McKay and Daniel, had she not received in that moment a text message in her data pad. It read, 'AFN'.

Her face became white. She double-checked its origin to be sure it was what it meant. Along with the Sangheili fifth column, she had developed a number of code words for them to use only in certain situations, and this short set of letters was part of it. To anyone else who might have been eavesdropping into her comms channel, it would have appeared as meaningless gibberish. To her, it was an anagram of the word 'fan'â€"as in, 'it's hit the fan'.

They had been compromised.

She left the room quietly and went out to the corridor. One of the many advantages of her armor: while in disguise mode, just like it was now, she still could use her helmet's comms to establish a secure link with her people, and to anybody who might see, it would seem as if she was only staring at a random point on the floor or the wall.

An image appeared on the upper left corner of her HUD; it was Guko. "Talk to me," she said.

"Shipmistress, we have intercepted a message from the Didact's Hand. Our movement has been exposed. Jul 'Mdama has already ordered the slaughter of many of our brothers and is hunting down the rest. The Forerunners are favoring us at least, because it was one of ours who got the message and not one of those loyal to 'Mdama."

Furlings, Halsey mentally corrected. "That won't last long. When 'Mdama gets no confirmation, he will keep sending the same message until one of his loyalists answers it. We can't risk any of them receiving it the next time. We need to make our move first."

Guko silently nodded. Her Elites would no doubt consider taking Glorified Wisdom by force, even if they were outnumbered three to one. Such a thing had never stopped their race in the past, after all. However, she was not willing to lose even one of her followers. She would still need each and every one of them, which meant she would need to find a way to sneak them out of the Corvette. And she knew of the best way to do so.

"Stand by. I'm working on a viable solution," she said before killing her comm link and walking back to the Core Room. Daniel and McKay were still arguing, but Sam was just waiting patiently, as if giving them enough time to let them blow off some steam. "Colonel Carter," Halsey called out in a whisper from the room's threshold.

Sam turned and walked towards her. "Is there a problem, Doctor?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so. I've just received word from my ship. Theyâ€" they've been attacked," Halsey lied. "An enemy squad managed to sneak aboard and have started to kill everyone in their path."

"Oh, God. Is there something we can do to help?"

"Perhaps. Can you bring my crew to this ship the same way you brought us from inside the Ark?"

"If you can get your people together in one single place, then yes, we can."

"Would you help us, then? Please?" Halsey's concern was genuine, but she still exaggerated her expression.

Sam did not answer right away, but after a few moments she just walked back inside the Core Room. "McKay, you know how to operate the Asgard beam transport from her, right?" she asked firmly and loudly, effectively terminating the discussion.

"Uhâ€¦ yeah?" McKay replied, suddenly lost for words.

"Good. Dr. Halsey," Sam turned to her, "I need you to contact your crew. Tell them to find a section of the ship where they can all seal themselves into. And tell them we need their ship's shields lowered before we can beam them aboard."

"The Corvette has no shields," Halsey replied.

"Oh. Well, that's great. Daniel, Teal'c, head to the starboard 302 Bay. Doctor, you're with me!" Sam was already sprinting down the corridor as she spoke that last sentence. Daniel also began running to his destination while Halsey tried to keep pace with Sam, and as she trotted behind her, she reopened her comm link.

"Guko, listen to me very carefully," she said. "Gather our people, fall back to the brig where we're keeping the Spartan and the ONI agent without making it too obvious, lock the room, and wait there for further instructions."

"As you command, Shipmistress."

On the way to the bridge, she ran into Edo and a pair of other Elites. "Shipmistress, we've been alerted. What will you have us do?" Edo asked.

"Get to the starboard fighter bay; make sure our people arrive safely," Halsey replied. The Elites departed, and she resumed her race to the bridge.

By the time Halsey got there, Sam was already at the command chair. "Doctor, our scans show no signs of a ship on the surface of the Ark, but we are reading several life signs at the same location Colonel Mitchell and Dr. McKay were at when we beamed them aboard."

"The Corvette is cloaked, so your sensors would not pick it. In fact, I am surprised you can detect life signs at all. What are you seeing?"

"Here, let me show you," Sam said, motioning forward with her head. Halsey turned to see the Hammond was now facing the Ark, and from a close distance too. A tactical image appeared at the center window, overlaying several icons on to the region where Glorified Wisdom would be. There were several scattered dots at what Halsey knew was the forward section of the Corvette, as well as a cluster of similar dots at the location she had provided her Sangheili.

"There they are," Halsey said, pointing at the cluster of dots.

"Are you absolutely certain, Doctor?"

"100 percent."

Sam pressed a button on her chair. "Rodney, we've located them. You ready?"

"In a second!"_ was McKay's answer.

Halsey did not wait. She began running again, heading this time for the 302 bay. It was well over a second before she heard Daniel's voice on the ship wide comm. "We got 'em!"_

As she entered the fighter bay where Daniel and Teal'c were already waiting, she saw all of her Elites safe and sound, as well as her two unconscious prisoners behind them. Needless to say, Daniel was staring at Palmer and Sullivan with a wondering look. She would find a way to explain that in time. Halsey walked towards Guko. "What's the situation?" she asked him.

"'Mdamas known about us all along. He gave the order to 'cleanse his Covenant of all unbelievers' shortly after we arrived here."

"What? How do you know that?"

"_Luminous Truth_ contacted us shortly after we intercepted the message from 'Mdamas. They apprised us about everything."

"_Luminous Truth_? Is that the abandoned damaged cruiser you found orbiting the remains of Joyous Exultation?"

"Yes, Shipmistress. It has been answering distress calls on various locations and rescuing survivors from the massacre."

"Is it repaired already?"

"Shields are barely working and it has no weapons capabilities whatsoever, but it is fully Slipspace capable and life support is entirely functional. It rescued the last group nine days ago and set course for the Ark. They should be here in less than two days?"

"Two days?" Halsey repeated in disbelief. "How?"

"The crew was able to modify the Slipspace drive before 'Mdamas gave the death order. Instead of making a single continuous jump, it allows for smaller jumps which still cover greater distances than most other ships, including _Pious Inquisitor_."

Despite the small bit of good news, Halsey still couldn't feel relieved. The day before, she had felt with enough luck after beating 'Mdamas in his own game. Now she realized he had always been in control, toying with her. He probably had sent her to the Ark to get rid of her while he exterminated the 'unbelievers'. Those three cruisers he had sent to 'support her', the ones _Infinity_ had destroyed? It was more than likely he had actually sent them to capture or kill her as well. The spy he had planted aboard her ship may just have been a backup plan. She would put nothing past 'Mdamas at this point. For all she knew, he could have an entire assault fleet just waiting at her proverbial doorstep, and even if _Luminous Truth_ managed to overrun it, her people would have a hard time escaping from it after rescuing herâ€"if the Corvette didn't pursue

them first.

And then, there was the _Infinity_. Halsey had hoped the crew of _Glorified Wisdom_ would either flee the Ark or risk exposing themselves to the UNSC's most powerful ship once they realized she was gone. She would have found a way to further convince SG-1 to help her return to her own. The fact that a relief cruiser was on its way to rescue her and her crew changed everything. There was no way _Infinity_ wouldn't fire upon an enemy _CCS_-class battleship coming out of Slipspace, just like it had done with the other three, even if it belonged to a different faction than the one 'Mdama commanded. Then again, they would still destroy that cruiser if they knew who it belonged toâ€”especially if they knew who it belonged to.

Her luck had finally run out.

No. We make our own luck.

There _was_ a way to take _Infinity_ out of the equation. This ship she was standing on, small as it was, carried a lot of tactically useful tech. From what Sam had told her, _Hammond_ possessed shields far more resilient than anything the UNSC had ever seen or even developed, a cloak way more advanced than any active camouflage she knew of, and a faster-than-light drive capable of traversing the void between two galaxies two and a half million light years apart in approximately the same time it took the fastest ship in this galaxyâ€”affiliation asideâ€”to travel from Earth to Reach. Surely, it would also have some offensive capabilities, even if Sam had failed to mention them. But convincing her of rescuing her Elites and tricking her into firing upon a UNSC ship were two different things. So, if Halsey wanted to use _Hammond_'s weapons to neutralize _Infinity_, there was only one choice left.

Halsey turned to look Daniel, then Sam who had just entered the massive fighter bay. She had earned their trust, but right now, it was just not enough.

Forgive me.

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC **_Infinity_**

2030 hrs. October 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Gotcha, Roland thought.

After what he had felt as three tiresome years of tracking and pinpointing, the mystery shipâ€”it _was_ a ship, and nothing could convince him otherwise nowâ€”had finally made a mistake. _Infinity_'s sensors had just picked yet another weird signature leaving the Ark and heading into seemingly empty space. Upon closer inspection, Roland had just realized that it was both an energy signature _and_ a matter stream of some sort, which in turn suggested the object he was tracking possessed some kind of teleportation capabilities, again suggesting the presence of intelligent life.

_Well, not so intelligent if they can't conceal something like this

from me._

In a matter of millisecondsâ€”for a change, at lastâ€”Roland had managed to locate the exact coordinates of the matter stream's destination. Further calibration of _Infinity_'s sensors had allowed him to confirm the presence of the intermittent energy signature that had him obsessed by now. It was time to clarify a few things.

"Captain Lasky!" he said with an excited tone, appearing through the holo-projector at the captain's quarters, "I've found them!"

Through the ship's internal sensors, Roland noticed the captain's heart rate and adrenaline production had spiked for a split-second as he had appeared in front of himâ€”in other words, he had startled Captain Lasky. He hadn't expressed it, though, and his vital signs had returned to normal for a moment there, probably until he realized the meaning of what he had just heard, at which point he jumped from his chair and virtually flew to the bridge, arriving there in record time. "Are you absolutely sure of it, Roland?" he asked as soon as he was no less than three inches from the viewport, his eyes scanning the space above the Ark.

"Positive, Captain," Roland answered, appearing this time at the holotable. "May I suggest we get close, broadcast an all-frequency hail, see what happens next?"

"Yes," Captain Lasky replied without hesitation. "Transmit the coordinates to Lieutenant James and get that hail ready."

"Do you want it to be friendly, hostile, or somewhere between?" Roland asked with a smirk on his face.

The captain took a few moments before answering, "Let's take a neutral approach, just in case. We still don't know what we're dealing with here."

Thankfully, Captain Lasky still had full confidence in Roland's common sense. In half the time it had taken Lieutenant James to steer _Infinity_, he had finished prepping the message. Now all he had to do was to waitâ€”and waitâ€”and wait. Even though _Infinity_ was faster than her size suggested, to an AI like himâ€”especially to _him_â€”it wasn't just fast enough. He tried to keep his 'mind' busy by reading, analyzing, and classifying the sensor data the ship collected as it went. He also tried to make heads and tails of what few data he had acquired before the other ship had disappeared. Best he could tell, it had to be no bigger than a _Paris_-class frigate, which meant it would possibly have limited firepower capabilities compared to _Infinity_. If its occupants were indeed hostile, they would either have to have something better than anything the UNSC had created or found in the galaxy, both offensively and defensively speaking, or turn tail and run to avoid being blasted into oblivion.

After a while, _Infinity_ came in range to transmit the message to the coordinates Roland had provided. Captain Lasky turned and simply nodded to him, and he broadcasted the hail using a synthesized version of the captain's voice, allowing it to be heard in the bridge as well. "Attention, unknown vessel. This is Captain Thomas Lasky of the UNSC ship _Infinity_. We are aware of your presence in this

sector, and you should know that six of our people have recently disappeared under mysterious circumstances. If you have nothing to do with this, then we can assure you that there is nothing to fear and no need to remain hidden. We have no intentions to harm you. But if you are responsible for this, then know that we will not tolerate it. If you do have our people prisoners, we demand that you return them to us immediately. Failure to do so or to answer this message will be considered as an act of war and we will be forced to attack you. We have the capability to destroy you and will not hesitate to make use of everything we have to ensure it."

Roland assumed that whoever was on that ship would not know how to speak English but would be advanced enough to have something that would allow for translation, and so he believed the reply would take some time. Therefore, when he heard a feminine voice in the E-band, he felt surprised at firstâ€ and then, he felt the AI equivalent of a shiver running down his spine. "I'd like to see you try," the all too eerily familiar voice said.

The captain's face became grim as he also recognized the voice.
"Doctor Halsey?"

"Captain, I must say I was beginning to wonder if you had forgotten about Commander Palmer and Major Sullivan."

"Doctor, you'd better not be behind this orâ€"

"Or what, Captain? You will use a barrage of Archer, Howler, and Rapier missiles to attack me, without even knowing exactly where I am?"

"It doesn't have to be this way, Doctor Halsey. Give us our people back and surrender peacefullyâ€"

"So you can finish what you were not able to on Requiem? I'm afraid it's a little too late for that."

"Please, don't force my hand. I don't want to kill you, but I will do everything in my power to stop you from doing any more harm in the name of the Covenant."

"Look, Captain Lasky. I really don't have time to argue with you, so I'll just make it simple. A Covenant cruiser is on its way here to take me elsewhere, and I would hate to see it destroyed the same way you took down the other three cruisers. If you promise to stay away from it, I will let you live. But if you interfere, I will have no choice but to neutralize you."

"I'm sorry?" Roland broke in. "You aren't seriously implying that you have a ship better than ours, are you?"

"Why don't you take a look for yourselves?" was the answer. And for the first time in hours, the sensors finally picked up something tangible, measurableâ€definitely a ship, and definitely small, even if it actually was just slightly larger than a Paris-class frigate. In fact, it looked like a flattened version of a Paris-class frigate, as if it had been under a steamroller, one of titanic proportions. The energy signature it emitted became constant, paired with yet another one which went off the charts. Whatever it was, it obviously could provide the smaller vessel with an obscene amount of

power.

How had she gotten her hands on something like this? And more important, where?

He decided to zoom in on the 'frigate' with one of the hi-res cameras he already had pointed at it to see if there could be something in the outer hull that could help him guess its origin. Much to his surprise, the side of the ship had the acronym 'U.S.A.F.' painted on it. He knew those letters meant 'United States Air Force', at least in the English language. The design and the fact that Dr. Halsey was the one piloting it confirmed it was human built. But did those letters mean something else? Otherwise, why use an acronym that hadn't been seen for centuries?

"Roland," Captain Lasky said, "is that ship big enough to withstand a shot from a Mass Driver?"

"It's possible, Captain."

"Are we in firing range?"

"Not really. But I might be able to get a firing solution from this distance." He was being politely humble, but in reality he could, without a shadow of doubt, fire a Mass Driver from ever farther away. And to be honest, he was half expecting Captain Lasky would give him the chance to do so.

"You have the forward array," the captain said, much to Roland's pleasure. "Fire a couple of warning shots."

Roland disappeared from the bridge without another word. He acquired his target as fast as he could, and fired. Two small MAC slugs crossed the void and flew to the side of his target, almost grazing it, in mere fractions of a second. He returned to the bridge just as the captain began speaking again to Doctor Halsey.

"I won't ask again, Doctor Halsey. Surrender now, or you will be destroyed."

There was a moment of silence before Halsey's response. "So be it."

The smaller ship began moving towards them. The captain was beginning to turn to Roland, but he could already guess what he would ask for. He disappeared again from the bridge and got to work on new firing solutions for all twelve fore Mass Drivers. Halsey's ship was starting to gain speed, but her course remained the same, which made his job easier. He first fired the two guns located at the top and bottom of the forward section of the hull respectively, aiming at the sides of the frigate, hoping that that would slow it down or even stop it dead in its tracks, since Spartan Palmer and Major Sullivan could be aboard it. From his perspective, the supersonic slugs looked like two pairs of slow-moving missiles, which streaked through space in a perfectly straight line towards their objective. They never reached it, though, as a silver-blue barrier of light prevented them from hitting the vessel.

Shields.

"Roland, what the hell was that?" he could hear Captain Lasky say in the bridge.

"Energy shielding, Captain," Roland replied through the speakers, not even taking time to reappear in the room. He fired all eight remaining cannons at the now speeding ship. He felt both disappointed and worried when, after waiting again for the shots to reach their objective, the result was the same. All the while, he was taking readings to try and determine how much damage had the shots caused, even though he suspected whatever energy source that ship possessed would be pumping more than enough juice to keep that shield up. And true enough, he could confirm the Mass Drivers had caused virtually no damage.

"It's coming at us!" someone at the bridge shouted in terror.

"Everyone, brace for impact!" Captain Lasky ordered, knowing that _Infinity_'s own shields would not allow the enemy ship through. It didn't have to, though, as the vessel shot upwards at the very last second. That thing surely was nimble, more than its size suggested.

"What is she doing?" the captain asked. Roland wondered the same thing as he kept track of the frigate. He thought of firing a volley of missiles, but apparently Halsey had thought of that first, as this time her ship didn't maintain a straight course, instead flying in zigzag before making a U-turn at 50 kilometers of distance from _Infinity_. Now, the frigate was facing them from behind, and in an exceptional occasion, Roland felt absolutely confused. He didn't know what to do, since he had just realized he knew nothing about that ship, except for the fact that it seemed to be building up energy in four different sections of its outer hull, much in the same way Covenant shipsâ€”

Oh, shit.

"Roland, is she trying to escape?"

"Negative, Captain," he replied, a tone of genuine dread in his voice. "I think she's planning on attacking us."

And he was proven right. He watched in fear through the aft cameras as one, then two, then four beams of light originating from the frigate streaked towards his ship. _Infinity_'s shield was able to hold off all four beams, but the strain was way too excessive and caused it to collapse violently. Roland quickly theorized that, if those beams had managed to drop the shield so quickly, they had to be a more powerful version of the Energy Projectors found on Covenant ships. Unlike the Covenant, though, the time between recharges seemed virtually nonexistent; just as quickly as the first beams had left Halsey's ship, another four were born and expelled from plasma cannons smaller than he thought possible for that kind of firepower. He felt useless and hopeless as the second salvo hit the engines and a terrible explosion rocked the entire ship, with enough force to cause several smaller explosions all over it, and also causing a lot of people to fall to the ground. Even at the bridge, sparks began flying everywhere, and many officers were thrown out of their chairs.

Roland immediately began running multiple diagnostics. Needless to say, the engines were first in a list of damaged systems, followed by power and life support failure on some decks, multiple hull breaches, andâ€”much to his dismayâ€”catastrophic failure in the weapons control system. Several point-defense cannons and Mass Drivers were gone, their power conduits overloaded, and those that remained, along with all missile pods, were of no use anymore, at least not until he managed to repair the control systemâ€”if such a thing was possible, all things considered. Among the less critical systems flashing red, bulkhead control for all frigate bays was out as well, meaning the ten-frigate compliment Infinity carried would be stuck inside the ship for a long time. Most sensors were down, but fortunately they were not damaged beyond repair, though it would take Roland some time to get them back online.

The Slipspace drive had, amazingly, remained unaffected, but without engines, it was no good. Still, that the whole ship had not been blown to kingdom come with all that raw energy hitting the single biggest piece of equipment Infinity possessed was nothing short of a miracleâ€”which, for a pragmatist artificial construct such as Roland, was just like some other religious mumbo-jumbo. And yetâ€”|

As for Halseyâ€”|

Somehow, one of the aft cameras had survived the massacre. Through it, he saw her ship make another U-turn just before getting too close to Infinity, this time heading for the far end of the Ark. Just before it became invisible again, she had sent a final transmission in text form. Roland didn't care to read it at the moment, focusing all his cycles in making sure everyone aboard was fine.

"Report!" Captain Lasky demanded.

Roland reappeared at the bridge and replied, "In a nutshell, we're screwed, but we could be worse."

"Meaning?" the captain asked with a raised eyebrow.

"We're sitting ducks right now, Captain. That explosion was the engines being blown to smithereens. Secondary explosions have wreaked havoc all over the place. Several critical systems are completely down, and we have some sections exposed to space. I'm trying to seal them off right now."

"Casualties?"

Roland made some rough estimates. Some people had been killed in the explosion, while others who were on the now breached sections had just disappeared from inside the ship, possibly thrown out into space. "About 1000 injuries; no less than 500 casualties," was Roland's answer.

The captain's expression sobered. "What about Halsey?"

"She just left," the AI replied. "And she left a note behind."

As the captain began rising from the floor, Roland allowed Halsey's final message to appear at the holotable. It read, "Next time, I won't be so merciful."

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_George Hammond_**

2043 hrs. October 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

It had all happened so fast. First, she had given her people the order to take the ship. Then, she had attacked _Infinity_. And now, she was leading the _Hammond_ as far away from the carnage as she could. All in a flash.

Her mind was still trying to process what had just happened when Guko entered the bridge. "Shipmistress, we have finished securing the human vessel. Major 'Nodam is escorting the last prisoners to the fighter bay. No casualties reported."

"Thank you, Guko," she replied. Truth be told, had it not been for those Zat guns, there _would_ have been casualties during the short struggle that ensued before _Infinity_'s approach. She took a moment to relive in her mind the moment when she had dropped her disguise, activated her energy dagger, and taken Daniel hostage at the fighter bayâ€|

"Catherine, what are you doing?" Daniel asked rather nervously while she was holding her plasma blade to his neck. Teal'c and Sam had their guns raised and trained at her by now, while the Elites had also drawn their plasma weapons.

"Colonel, if you'd be so kind as to take me to the bridge without making much of a fuss, please?" Halsey said, ignoring Daniel's question.

"Doctor," Sam said, "put that down."

"Colonel, I don't want a bloodbath here. Do you?"

"Then let Daniel go. I don't know why you're doing this, but we can sort this out."

_"There's nothing to sort out. I need your ship, you'll lend it to me, end of story. I'll let Daniel go once you've promised to let me use the _Hammond_ for a while without interfering."_

"Shipmistress," Edo said, armed with a carbine, "I have a clear shot at the one with the forehead mark."

_"Do not shoot!" Halsey ordered. "Do not even return fire. You know what to do if they shoot first, but whatever happens, do _not_ open fire." She hoped he'd gotten the message._

_"Doctor, let Daniel go," Sam demanded with a firm voice this time. When Halsey didn't comply, and apparently confident of the order she had just given the Elites, she nodded at Teal'c, who fired his weaponâ€an odd-shaped device which resembled a snakeâ€at her. The energy beam produced by the weapon hit Daniel first before transferring to her, but while it caused him to convulse and fall to

the ground, she remained unaffected; her shield had borne the brunt of it._

At this point, Edo engaged his active camouflage, and the rest of the Sangheili followed suit. Less than three seconds later, both the Jaffa and the Colonel had lost their weapons and been subdued by invisible forces. Their arms being held behind their backs, Teal'c and Sam's defying expressions remained, and they kept struggling to free themselves from the Elites' grip.

Edo reappeared at Halsey's side holding in his hand the alien gun. She took it and pressed the button on the side, which 'deployed' the barrel; she pressed it again, and the weapon folded back. She looked Sam directly to the eyes, aimed at her, and said, "It would have been easier if you had just played along." But before she could fire, Daniel managed to grab her leg, not with enough force to make her tumble, but enough to call for her attention.

"Don't shoot it twice!" he managed to say with whatever strength he had left and a desperate look in his face. Halsey could only assume he had tried to warn her about the weapon. She felt tempted to do the opposite and test it on one of her new prisoners, or maybe even with Sullivan or Palmer, but she didn't. She couldn't.

"Why can't I shoot twice?" Halsey asked Sam.

"Because two consecutive shots from a Zat are always lethal," she replied. "A single shot is enough to stun most peopleâ€"except you, apparently."

"My energy shield protected me, although I'll admit this may have permanently damaged it," Halsey said, noticing that the recharge bar in her HUD had not been restored. "I'm sorry it has to come to this, Colonel," she continued, lowering her voice. "It would have been easier if you had just ceded command to me."

She shot Sam first, then Teal'c, and both fell. The Sangheili holding them were smart enough to let go at the very moment she fired the gun. Halsey handed the weapon back to Edo. "You've been walking all over the ship for the last few hours. Have you seen any armory?" she asked.

"Several, Shipmistress," the Elite replied.

"Good. Take a SpecOps team to one of them. If there is anyone guarding it, use this gun to incapacitate them, but as these people said, don't shoot twice at the same target. Break into the armory, arm yourselves, and take enough for the rest of us. We're taking this ship for ourselves until Luminous Truth arrives, and I don't want any casualties in the process. Understood?"

Edo nodded and took the 'Zat'. He reengaged his camo, and left.

"Orbit established, Shipmistress", a voice to her left brought her back from the depth of her thoughts. "Luminous Truth should return to normal space near these coordinates." Of course, 'orbit' was a misnomer, but then again, there was still no proper term for an artificial object achieving a stable position above a flat world like the Ark.

"Thank you, Nal," Halsey replied, acknowledging her protection. One of the scarcely few Sangheili youngsters currently serving among the Covenant ranks, and one of the even fewer Sangheili who had some degree of knowledge on human technology, Nal 'Izan was a jewel. The first time Halsey met her, she was baffled. She had always believed Sangheili females were never allowed to fight alongside the men. But Nal was a good fighter and knew how to use a weapon. It was thanks to her that she learned that all females of her race knew how to defend themselves, since they were trained to protect their keeps if war ever erupted on Sanghelios.

Halsey also witnessed the ultimate example of the Elite equivalent of a rebellious teenager. Nal had known what a sense of duty towards her people was since a very young age, and she had always wanted to contribute in the front lines rather than to remain on her homeworld and take care of a keep. She was brave and smart, and she believed she could make a difference, law and tradition notwithstanding. She had actually found a way to leave Sanghelios undetected by sneaking aboard one of the Arbiter's cruisers leaving the planet to face 'Mdama in battle. The cruiser had been defeated and boarded, yet she still had been able to evade capture for a while—until Edo 'Nodam found her hiding inside one of the Huragok service tunnels. Had it been one of the Didact's Hand's henchmen, she would've probably been taken prisoner at best, executed at worse, for breaking the most honorable ways of the Sangheili, but Edo saw her value from the very first moment. He had taken her to the Glorified Wisdom shortly before the Corvette had been given to Halsey, and soon thereafter, Nal proved her worth.

Halsey may have been the one to design her prosthesis and armor, but it had been Nal who had operated the medical equipment—human equipment—that had fused the robotic arm to her body, and it had been Nal who had helped build the armor from scratch. And now, she had been the one to fly the Hammond with such grace and agility, like it were a Seraph. She had been the one to fire Hammond's weapons—at Halsey's order, of course—with such accuracy, using a human system which had no resemblance to anything the UNSC had ever developed.

The difference between geniuses and prodigies: geniuses may be extremely smart and abound in every age, but it is prodigies who establish turning points in history, even though they are born only once every few hundred years. Prodigies come on all ages and sizes, and they transcend the barriers of sexes, castes, and social status. This was true for humans, but Nal was living proof that the same thing was true about the Sangheili. She was easily a Sangheili version of Sam, even if she hadn't learned yet all the theory behind the technical stuff she liked to work on.

Is it possible there is an actual alternate universe in which humans and Sangheili have never been enemies? Halsey couldn't help but wonder. Imagine all the achievements both races could have accomplished together, had it not been for the Covenant!

She pushed the thought from her mind and focused back on the task at hand. For the moment, they were safe, but they needed a way off this ship. A dropship was out of the question, since it would take more time to ferry her entire crew from the Hammond to Luminous Truth than she would like to spend. The 'beaming technology' of this ship

could provide her with a quick escape, but she needed to understand it first.

"Guko, stay here and keep the bridge safe. Nal, come with me," Halsey said. The young Elite rose from the chair, tall but not as much as the rest. She was less beefy than the others, too, and her mandibles were less protruding, but she still looked menacing to anyone who didn't know about those subtle differences between males and females. Halsey rose up as well and began walking towards the Core Room, thinking about what their next move would be once they left the Ark. 'Mdama had already screwed all that she had planned to do after getting the second half of the Key. Luminous Truth provided her with a good tactical advantageâ€”if they found a way to repair it, of courseâ€”, and he still had no idea of her next destination, but he would undoubtedly have other ships on the lookout for her. Moving around the galaxy would become awfully dangerous from now on, and completing her true goal would be all but impossible. Unlessâ€”|

As she approached the Core Room, an idea popped into her mind.

This ship could still provide her with the means of achieving what she had intended since that moment two months ago when, along with the coordinates leading to the Ark, her computer had registered a single line of text in Italian coming from the artifact. If only she managed to understand the Core, of course.

Halsey and Nal stood in front of the Asgard Computer Core. It was still active, as no-one had been able to turn it off when the Elites incapacitated the people inside the room. Halsey stared at the screen, mostly filled with runes she could not even begin to comprehend. How ironic, she thought. I can perfectly understand a language completely unknown to mankind, and I don't know how to read a bunch of alien symbols so similar to those found on Earth itself. Her area of expertise was different, of course, but she had had an opportunity to take an entire branch of language lessons back in college, and she had turned them down in favor of other subjects. How she wished she hadn't done so right now!

Nal had the very same look as Halsey. Language was everything, and without a grasp of this one, it would be really hard for her to have some progress. Halsey knew the screen could display everything in English if the proper translation command was given, but first she had to know how to do so. One push of the wrong button, and she could blow the Core or wipe out its contents, at worst. And then, there was the matter of understanding the technology itself in order to find something that would suit her purposes.

"This is going to take a while," Halsey thought out loud.

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC **_Infinity_**

2048 hrs. October 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"Roland, there has to be a way!"

"I'm sorry, Captain. There isn't."

"You're telling me we're standing on the most powerful ship ever built by mankind, and we're no better now than sticks and stones?"

"A three-and-a-half-mile long stick, but that's a good way to put it," Roland replied.

"No." Lasky was not willing to admit defeat. "No, the Engineersâ€" "

"I've already told you, Captain. The Huragok we have onboard may be able to repair all minor damage to the shipâ€"weapons and bulkhead control systems, sensors, and the likeâ€"but they cannot fix what we don't have anymore. Now, if we can allow our frigates to escape and return to Earth to make a sit-rep, HIGHCOM might just as well give the order to disassemble the engines from Eternity and send them here along with a nice support fleet to reassemble them and put them into our ship, but until then, we're staying right where we are."

Lasky stepped away from the holotable and began walking in circles. He felt helpless, desperate. Halsey had just killed five hundred of his people and injured twice as many. For the first time, he was regretting not allowing Palmer to complete her mission on Requiem. There had to be something he could do to stop her, right here, right now. "How did she get her hands on something like that, anyway?" he thought out loud. "Insurrectionists? A stolen ONI secret project? What?"

"What bothers me even more is the fact that she was here, of all places," Roland said.

"Yeah; that, too. Palmer and Sully disappear, and Halsey appears shortly thereafter. There has to be a connection."

"I believe there is, but you're not going to like it, Captain Lasky."

Lasky stopped walking around the bridge and stared out the viewport. "Why is that, Roland?"

"Remember Major Sullivan's sudden escape from the ship?"

He remembered it clearly, and to be honest, he had already considered that possibility, even if he didn't want to.

"You think Sullyâ€"?" his voice trailed off. He couldn't bring himself to say that his friend could've become a traitor.

"It's possible."

But why? Lasky thought. What could he possibly offer her and vice versa? For this trip, he had been just tagging along to make sure they got to the right place. Noâ€" he was just trying to tell himself that to avoid admitting a terrible truth. ONI had sent Blue Team as escort for him. Why would they do that, unless they knew he would need it? And why would he need it, unless he was meeting with someone potentially dangerous? That could mean Sully had not been acting alone, but with ONI support. Hell, he might have been running an

errand_for_ ONI, something so important they had retorted to asking for help from the most dangerous human who had defected to the Covenant.

Then he realized.

"Roland, remind me of something," Lasky said. "What happened to the artifact Spartan Thorne brought back from Requiem while looking for Halsey?"

"ONI confiscated it for study the moment we were back on Earth."

"Didn't Glassman say we just seemed to have half of it?"

Lasky saw in the window the reflection of Roland's hologram flickering for a second. "You think Major Sullivan was meeting Halsey because of that artifact?"

"Why else would he be? For that matter, why the Ark? Why not meet somewhere else? He told me it had taken ONI a long time to locate this place. Maybe they didn't locate it at all."

"Halsey could have provided the coordinates," Roland stated. "And they sent us here to make sure it was not a trap. Problem is, it seems it _was_."

"Then Halsey used ONI to get something she needed. Maybe the ship?"

"Captain, I must admit that the reason why I'm not as worried about that ship as I am of Halsey being here and taking it over, is because I don't think it was intended for her. I seriously doubt theyâ€"whoever 'they' areâ€"were trying to help her. And I can assure you that there is no way that ship was built by us or anyone else that we know of."

"And that doesn't worry you?"

"No, because they may have gotten here by accident."

Roland was becoming way too cryptic as of lately, and Lasky was starting to feel irritated by it. "What do you mean by that?"

"That ship may look like it was constructed by humans, and it may even be so, but it was not constructed anywhere near _this_ galaxy."

"_This_ galaxy? You mean, they're from another galaxy?"

"Not exactly. Here, take a look at this."

Lasky walked away from the viewport and back to the holotable as Roland displayed a high-res image of the unknown ship, which he had tagged 'Frigate' for reasons that soon became obvious to him. It did look like a human-built ship, alright, from top to bottom, from bow to stern. It was very similar in size to a UNSC frigate. Even the letters on its front side looked like capital letters from the English alphabet. "Anything in particular you wanted me to see?" Lasky asked.

"I believe you already have, Captain," Roland replied, highlighting the same letters again. Upon reading them again, Lasky mentally kicked himself for skipping something as obvious as that.

"'U.S.A.F.' United States Air Force?"

"I couldn't believe it the first time, either. But it is the only thing that makes sense. The advanced technology, the similarities, even those anomalies I kept registering through the ship's sensors."

"What are you talking about now, Roland?" Lasky asked, finally annoyed.

"Ever heard about the multiverse theory?"

Oh, boy. More science lessons, Lasky thought. "Never in my life? Could you try to explain it in few words?"

"In a nutshell, that frigate may be from an alternate universe, a different version of the Milky Way we know so well, a place where we may have never found the Covenant and we were able to advance to unparalleled levels!"

Lasky took a moment to try to understand that. Those were few words, indeed, but he'd gotten the gist of it. "So, those are alternate versions of the humans who live in this galaxy, probably of people we know. And now they are victims of Halsey's actions, just like the rest of us."

"I'd prefer to think that. Otherwise, we have a new, powerful enemy in our hands who has allied with the worst gal in the universe."

"Either way, we have to get aboard that ship," Lasky said with conviction.

"Uh, Captain, there may be a slight problem with that. You see, that ship has some sort of active camo, and right now, it is rendering the frigate completely invisible. So, unless you have a way of boarding something we can't seeâ€¦"

"Ship's sensors were able to detect it, were they not?"

"Barely. And those are gone for the time being."

"Get the Huragok to work on those as soon as they're done with bulkhead control systems. Forget about the weapons for now. As of this moment, this is our top priority. And recall Blue Team," Lasky concluded. "They are the only ones I trust to get this done rightâ€¦" he paused, resigned to the fact that Halsey was as much of a threat as Jul 'Mdama himself. "And I think it's about time they know what happened to the woman who created them."

* * *

><p>Current location unknown; presumably in orbit above the Ark

****USS ****_George Hammond_****

****1500 hrs. August 5, 2013****

Cam opened his eyes slowly. He felt dizzy, every bone and muscle in his body ached, his vision was blurry, and his ears were ringing. The all too familiar feeling of a Zat shot.

The last thing he remembered was seeing McKay working with the Asgard Core before he heard the weapon firing into the room. He never saw who pulled the trigger.

About a minute later, he began listening more clearly. Voices. Lots of voices. One of those was Sam's. He closed his eyes again and reopened them, trying to get his lacrimal gland to produce enough water to clean up his eyeballs. He tried to rise up, but his arms still were too weak, and he fell.

"Cam!" he heard Sam yell. Then he felt her arm around his as she helped him sit upright. He blinked once more, and everything became clearer. Now he could see he was inside the starboard 302 Bay, along with pretty much the rest of the crew. To his left, McKay was still unconscious. To his right, a man and a woman he had never seen before lay in the same state as Rodney.

He quickly deduced what had happened.

"I knew we shouldn't have trusted that woman," he said hoarsely.

"We had no way of knowing," Sam replied, although Cam could detect a slight tone of regret in her words.

"Oh, I told you so. I said that woman reminded me of Linea, big time. Didn't I say that a couple of times?"

"Indeed." That was Teal'c behind him, his voice even deeper than usual. So, Sam, Teal'c, and him; three out of four. But where was Jackson?

Cam tried to stand up again, and he succeeded this time. He looked all over the place until he spotted Daniel behind an F-302, sitting against the wall with his head clasped in his palms. He tried to walk over there, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him; again, Sam's.

"Not now, Cam," she said. "He's pretty upset with all this."

"What exactly happened?" Cam asked.

"Halsey and her crew took the ship," she replied.

"That much seems obvious," Cam said.

"She took Daniel hostage to try and force me to 'lend' it to her. I refused, Teal'c shot her, but she withstood the Zat."

Cam shot her a double-take. "She withstood a shot from a Zat?"

"She was wearing some kind of armor, just like the other aliens. Her lab coat was a disguise; holographic, I think."

"I told you not to trust her," Cam repeated. "I told you she was dangerous. I tried to tell everyone that she was a security risk for all of us!"

"Then you are smarter than you look," another voice broke into the conversation. Cam turned to see the unknown woman rising from the floor with her one arm. Despite the situation, Cam couldn't help but think she looked really hot in thatâ€¦ black swimsuit.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Infinity Commander Spartan Sarah Palmer," she replied in an all-too-formal military way, albeit without the salute.

"That's a long name," Cam said, making her frown slightly.

"Who are you?" she asked, looking at him first, then at Sam, then at Teal'câ€"and here she raised an eyebrow when she saw the golden tattoo in his face. She got the same expression from him in return.

"Colonel Cameron Mitchel, United States Air Force," Cam answered, trying to sound as formal as her. She didn't look as surprised as Halsey had been to hear the words 'United States'. "This is Colonel Samantha Carter, Commander of this ship, and our tall friend here is Teal'c."

"Teal'câ€¦" she said in a querying tone.

"Just Teal'c."

"I see," she spoke through her teeth. "'United States'. You guys seriously needed to disguise yourselves like old U.S. Air Force people?" That caused more than a confused look in everyone. "I mean, I know ONI love secrecy and all that, but this?"

"Oh, no," Cam said, suddenly understanding. Halsey had mentioned those initials the day before. "I'm afraid we're not ONI people. We're just plain old Americans from a plain old alternate version of Earth. Sort of."

Palmer seemed taken aback by this, but much to her credit, she took this statement seriously. "If you had a close encounter with Catherine Halsey," she said to Cam, regaining her tone, "you should feel lucky to be alive. Maybe you have something of value she needs?"

"I take it you have met before," Cam said. He noticed her gaze diverting for a split second to her left side. "Which makes me wonder," he continued, "which side you are on. I mean, you are certainly not hers, but by now it has been made clear to me that there is a war going on out here. So, are you one of the good guys, or the bad guys?" she said.

"I take it back," Palmer said. "You are just as smart as you seem."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm sure you believe you are the good guys, just as everyone does in war. But we've already made this mistake yesterday, and now I want to be damn sure I'm backing the right horse."

"You don't seem to have the ability to back anything right now, Colonel," she relied in an amused tone. "But if you must know, Catherine Elizabeth Halsey used to be on our side, until she defected to the Covenant."

"That is not what she told us," Daniel said from his corner with a muffled voice, his face still buried in his hands.

"I bet she didn't," Palmer replied. "She is a traitorous liar who committed some of the worst crimes against mankind up to this day."

Cam turned to see Sam with a look that said more than words. "That sounds familiar."

"She must've had a reason," Daniel broke in, standing this time and walking towards the group. "There has to be a reason."

"There is," Palmer admitted. "She's a fugitive and a murderer. She knows we're onto her, and she's desperately trying to do as much damage as she can before we get her." Cam detected the anger in Palmer's voice, and quite honestly, he believed it was genuine, and not just because of her missing arm. God, we allowed a devil inside our ship._

"What are our chances?" Cam asked slowly, fearing the answer.

"Like I said, if you're still alive, you have something she wants. How many of your crew did she kill?"

"None," Sam said. "Everyone is alive and accounted for."

Palmer huffed. "You really must have something big."

"Oh, stop it already," Daniel said, clearly mad. "Why should we trust you?"

"Danielâ€|" Cam whispered.

"No. Seriously, why should we believe in her more than we first believed in Catherine? Just because they are the ones pursuing her?"

"Daniel," Cam warned him.

"OK, yeah. She took the ship by force. But the reason she didn't kill us is because she does have a conscience. She chose not to kill us! And what about you?" he asked Palmer. "You claim she did this to you, but why are you still alive? Or is it that you have something she needs, too?"

"Jackson!" Cam snapped, realizing he had called one of his comrades by his last name for the first time in years. Daniel noticed, too, as he looked deeply into his eyes. He looked sad, disappointed, regretful, even more than Sam. He walked away and returned to his

lone corner behind the space fighter.

"I take it he's not military," Palmer said, breaking the silence.

"No, he's not," Cam replied, not taking his eyes away from him.

"It doesn't matter. I've seen a lot of eggheads like him before. Hard to understand, butâ€"

"Excuse me?" Cam replied. "He may be stubborn, but that 'egghead', as you call him, is one of the best people I have ever met, and one of my best friends too. And like it or not, we may be prisoners of the same woman, but this is our ship, and if you want us to save your asses, you'll treat our people with more respect. Is that clear, Commander?" he concluded, three inches away from her face. She may have been slightly taller than him, but he intended to make it clear he was not intimidated by her.

Palmer did not reply right away. Rather, she waited until her veins were no longer popping in her head before saying, "And how exactly do you plan to rescue us, Colonel Mitchell?"

"Help is on its way," Sam broke in, surely realizing this was a breath away from becoming a pissing match; Cam mentally thanked her for the interruption. As much as he hated it, they would still need to work together to survive. "Daedalus was on its way back to Earth when we came here. We were tracking a new menace in Pegasus which apparently originated from this galaxy. I'm sure Homeworld Command will have sent help to do so by now. All we have to do is to activate our emergency transponder, they'll detect it and change course to assist us."

"Isn't that transponder located at the bridge?" Cam asked.

"Not necessarily. After our last experience with Todd, I decided to install a new security measure, in case any of our ships was hijacked ever again, to allow us prisoners to keep a tactical advantage."

"You can open the doors for us?" Palmer asked.

"I could, but I'm not sure that would be wise, not with all those aliens out there, and especially not with the stealth advantage they have."

"Then what's the idea?" Cam queried.

"To activate the transponder from here. When the cavalry arrives, we'll sort the rest out."

"If you actually manage to live that lâ€" Palmer began, but was cut midsentence when the hangar bay door opened and a half-dozen Elites entered the room, with Halsey walking in behind them. Her words would only help to give Palmer's more weight.

"I'm going to make it simple. I need your helpâ€| and I'm not taking a 'no' for an answer."

* * *

><p>AN: Aaaaaand we're back to the Main Story Arc!**

**I really hope you liked this chapter. As you can see, the way things are going right now, this fic is far from over. I've already finished writing down the outline for the next six chapters, and I'll start working on Chapter 11 by Sunday tops. Once again, I ask you to be patient with me. I may not be able to update as regularly as I'd like to, but I'll do my best. Truth be told, it is waaaay easier for me to describe this plotline than the one I developed for Chapters 7-9, even when I had clear ideas for both plotlines.

>

If you think there are any major holes in the story, feel free to mention them on your Review. I'll PM you if I really screwed up, but take heed: I left a few thing unclear on purpose for the time being, so if you don't get a reply, it's because the answer to your questions will be found on the next chapter(s).

Don't forget about the poll! Should I make a Halo/SGU Season 3 crossover? You can express your opinion by going to my profile page and clicking 'Yes' or 'No'.

See you all on the next chapter!

EDIT: I updated the poll's question to make it clearer. Someone helped me notice the first question was somewhat ambiguous, so here's the question again. Should I make a Halo/SGU Season 3 crossover after completing this fic?

11. Chapter 11: Forced Alliances

A/N: Who's ready for Chapter 11?

I can hear you say "Me!", so let's go!

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_George Hammond_**

1917 hrs. August 7, 2013

Cam woke up for the third time in the last two days. He had dreamt of being back at Odyssey's chair, in the middle of a battle with the Lucian Alliance. He had succeeded in defeating them, again. But when he opened his eyes, he found himself still in the 302 bay where he and the rest of Hammond's crew were being held as prisoners.

If someone would've told him five years ago that he would be in command of one of Earth's BC-304s, he would have laughed in his face. If anyone would've told him that he would come to love the chairâ€¦|

He was a fighter pilot, after all. And that had been before stepping through the Stargate for the first time. Even if he had been able to keep SG-1 together for only two years, those years had been the best

in his life. There was no way he would have let that rush go for a permanent command position in a _ship_—especially after what had happened with James Marrick.

And yet, after the first month, he had already grown fond of his position, of the ship, and most importantly, of the crew. His crew. His new family.

To think all of them had been complete strangers the first day he'd aboard! But he had earned their respect ever since, and they had all bonded together after fighting many battles against the Lucian Alliance, defending outposts, striking critical blows and whatnot. Now, he couldn't help but hope they were all fine. Nick, Alice, Jim—just a few names in a long list of names he couldn't bring himself to recall now for fear of getting too emotional. It was neither the right time nor the right place.

He rose from the cold floor and scanned the room, making a quick head count. Every single member of Sam's crew was there. Teal'c was standing guard at the door, paying attention to everything around him, just making sure there were no Sangheili inside. Palmer and the other UNSC fellows—a guy by the name of Sullivan—were sitting atop a pair of crates not far away from him.

McKay and Daniel were still nowhere to be seen. And Sam—

She was sitting on the floor at the far end of the room, resting her back against a stack of missiles, staring at the wall directly in front of her. Cam knew the last few days had been harder for her than for anyone else in that bay, knowing that she had unknowingly harbored a galactic criminal who had seized the opportunity to claim the _Hammond_, and who had taken Rodney and Daniel away from the rest for reasons no one could comprehend. For all they knew, she had already killed them. That had to weigh heavily on anyone.

Cam walked past several crew members until he was at her side. "Hey, Sam," he said. "You OK?"

Sam raised his eyes to see him; she looked like she'd been crying a lot recently. "Yeah. All things considered."

"Sam—"

"I was— I was just thinking, trying to keep my mind busy. You know, after this, the _Apollo_ and the _Sun Tzu_ will be the only ships in our fleet that haven't been hijacked." She tried to say something else, but she couldn't. Tears started to fall from her eyes, although she tried to contain them.

"Sam, don't feel bad," Cam said, sitting next to her. "She tricked you"

"It's not that!" she replied, already sobbing. "It's just— I've made this same mistake before, several times, and I still can't learn the lesson!"

"Hey, it's not your fault," Cam said, putting his left arm around her, trying to comfort her. "From what I've read, Linea did look like a good person the first time you met her at Hadante, and being tricked by RepliCarter doesn't count. She was you— in a twisted,

megalomaniac way, but she was you."

Despite the tears, Sam grinned at this comment.
"'RepliCarter'?"

"You didn't know that's what everyone calls her?" Cam asked, and Sam shook her head. "You should! I mean, she appears in official records as 'Replicator Carter', but that name's just too long when someone is trying to relate that story." She raised her eyebrow slightly, and the tears stopped flowing.

"Sam," Cam continued, "people don't talk about your mistakes. They talk about your achievements, your genius—like what you did when you blew up that sun, or when you were able to modify Merlin's device to save an entire town from the Ori, or when you lead the battle against the Pegasus Replicators." Sam began shaking her head, but Cam wouldn't stop. "People would follow you anywhere because of who you are, even if you screw up sometimes. You know why? Because they know you'll find a way to fix it. You always do."

Cam stood slowly. He knew he sometimes sucked at his bedside manners, but he truly hoped his words would encourage Sam just enough. He stood and offered his hand to help Sam rise, and he added, "If it makes you feel any better, you're not the only one deceived by Halsey."

"I thought you didn't trust her at all," she replied, accepting his hand to stand.

"Well, I must admit I also wanted to believe she was telling the truth. I almost did by the time she showed her true colors. You see, this team needs someone wary enough to warn the rest about potential dangers, someone to be the voice of common sense from time to time. But we tend to believe in the good will of people because that's just who we are. We're always trying to find the best in them 'cause we don't want to see the evil in our own kind—| even when we know we humans have a capacity for such evil. And we can't—| we must not—| forsake that, or we risk becoming something close to what Halsey is now." Cam noticed Palmer was listening from afar, even if she pretended she wasn't.

And suddenly, a light above one of the panels in the back of the room blinked, accompanied by a SOS beeping originating from inside the wall. Sam and Cam looked at each other; that was a sign that someone had detected their signal and was trying to contact them. They walked to the wall, Sam pushed a small section of it, and it revealed a small touchscreen behind it. It was showing a text message.
Hammond, this is _Odyssey_. We've picked up your distress beacon, and in compliance with Code HJ-19, we've opened a secure radio channel linked directly with your emergency comm systems. Please, respond."_

Sam touched the device a few times, giving the small computer a series of instructions to verify the channel, and once she was satisfied with the result, she inputted a command to activate the nano-camera installed at the top border of the screen so that whoever was at the bridge of _Hammond_'s sister ship would be able to see her. "_Odyssey_, this is Carter."

Much to Cam's surprise, when the video feed from _Odyssey_ came in,

John Sheppard was standing there. _"Sam,"_ he said, _"it's good to hear you again. You alright?"_

"We're good, so far," she replied. "How are things back on Earth?"

"You know, same as usual."

"Sheppard, you sitting on my chair?" Cam asked.

"Relax, Cam Solo. I'm just keeping it warm for ya."

"Thanks. I suppose. You alone, or did you bring more backup?"

_"_Daedalus_ is here as well. Now, anyone care to explain me what are we looking at?"_

"You mean the giant ship, or the massive artificial world?" Cam said.

"Both, I guess."

"Well, the big, metal starfish is a Furling installation called the Ark. The ship is called _Infinity_, it is manned by humans from Earth, and long story short, we need you to get help from them."

"What have I missed?" Sheppard said, clearly confused.

"Did Colonel O'Neill brief you on our situation?" Sam asked.

"He told me about your first contact with a rather unnerving woman and her alien minions, but he said nothing about you being in trouble."

"Things have gone sideways," Cam said. "Apparently, we came in contact with the wrong people. Now we need to contact the _right_ people to fix this. And they are aboard that ship."

"Fair enough. What should I tell them?"

"Stand by." Cam walked away from the screen towards Palmer. Swallowing his pride and without a trace of sarcasm, he said, "Alright, Commander Palmer, listen. We obviously had a rough start, and we obviously haven't exactly looked eye to eye since then. But we still need each other to get out of this, so I'll ask nicely. Would you help us?"

Palmer stared at him for a full fifteen seconds before replying, "How can I be of assistance?"

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC **_Infinity_**

0233 hrs. October 11, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"How's it going, Roland?"

"Pelican is ready, Captain Lasky," the AI's hologram replied. "The Huragok have made a magnificent job with it. Sensors, on the other hand, are still down, and without those, we still can't carry out our plan."

Not good, Lasky thought, but there was nothing he could do about it. As long as they managed to pull this off in timeâ€¦| "Keep working on it."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Roland answered, and vanished from the bridge. But as Lasky began walking away from the holotable, he reappeared. "Uh, Captain. We're being hailedâ€¦| on a standard ONI encrypted channel. Audio only."

ONI? Was it possible Earth had sent someone to check in on _Infinity_'s mission progress? Could they provide any kind of assistance? He had to know. "Let's hear it," he told Roland. He didn't expect what he heard when the audio sounded through the speakers.

_"This is _Infinity_ Commander Spartan Sarah Palmer, authentication code Sierra-Foxtrot-Alpha-Oh-Seven-Six-Two-Nine-One. Major Sullivan and I are been held prisoners by Catherine Halsey aboard the USS _George Hammond_, a ship of human origin which has come from a different version of our Earth located in another galaxy. I'm sure you'll find this difficult to understand for the moment, but what really matters is that Halsey and a number of Sangheili have taken this ship and imprisoned its crew along with us. The ship's commander, however, has managed to access its comm systems from our holding area to ask for help. Now, two more ships have arrived to assist them and us, but they need your support and expertise if we are to retake this ship. As soon as this transmission is over, they will contact you. Captain Lasky, I ask of you: trust them in everything they say. Our survival depends on it."_

It was just a recording. That sounded as Palmer, alright. And that last phrase carried a slight tone of desperation. But the timingâ€¦|

"Roland, can you tell if this message is real or a fake?"

"I can, Captain," Roland replied, "and it's quite real. What I can't tell is whether she was being held at gunpoint when she recorded this or not."

"So, you think this could be a trap?"

"I don't know what to think, Captain Lasky. But I don't think we have anything to lose at this point by just listening to these people, have we?"

Lasky thought otherwise, but he was unable to say so, as in that moment a different voice came through the radio channel. _"UNSC _Infinity_, this is Colonel John Sheppard, acting commander of the USS _Odyssey_. Do you read?"_

That was not a recorded message this time. Someone was trying to contact themâ€¦| someone from the United States, apparently. Was

Roland's theory correct? What was he supposed to say?

_"UNSC _Infinity_, this is Colonel John Sheppard of the USS _Odyssey_. If you can hear us, please respond."_

Understanding Roland's idea and accepting it were two different things. Lasky was having a hard time believing some people from another universe had traveled from their Earth to here. This could all be an elaborate ruse from Halsey, something to keep him occupied, or worse. He had to be cautious, no matter how much Roland thought they were not involved in all this. "USS _Odyssey_," he finally answered, "this is Captain Thomas Lasky of the UNSC _Infinity_. May I see the face of the person I'm speaking to?"

He looked at Roland, who nodded when he received the mixed transmission. A nearby screen came alive, and the face of a young man about his age and with a messy hairstyle, standing in the middle of what looked like a ship's bridge teeming with people, appeared before his eyes. _"There you go,"_ he said._ _"Is there any chance we can see you?"_

Lasky nodded to Roland. The expression on Colonel Sheppard's face told him the video link had been successful. "You know, I have seen a lot of weird things," Lasky said with just a tiny bit of irony in his voice, "but I had never met people from an alternate version of Earth."

"Trust me. That's not the weirdest thing to see out there," Sheppard replied.

"I don't know. I've seen some pretty crazy stuff in my life. But a bunch of people coming from another universe? That sounds really preposterous."

"Hey, you know it's true, don't you?"

"The fact that Commander Palmer said so doesn't make it real, not under her current condition. I'm leaning more towards the idea of you being insurrectionists allied with Dr. Halsey and the Covenant to destroy us by using some sort of prototype ship stolen from ONI." Lasky looked at Roland out of the corner of his eye; he had frowned at this statement. Obviously, he was wondering what his good Captain was trying to achieve with all this talk.

_"OK, you don't trust us. I get that. And if I were in the same position as you, I would have my doubts, too. But right now, you have no choice. _Your_ people and _my_ people are _both_ trapped inside one of our _own_ ships, and the only way to get them back is by working together. So, like it or not, we're both on the same side."_

"Are we?" Lasky said. "Tell me something. If your people are trapped inside one of _your_ ships, as you say, wouldn't they know of a way out?"

_"They do know of a way out. What they _don't_ know is how to face their captors,"_ Sheppard replied. _"But you do."_

"True enough. And that is why we will deal with this situation ourselves. We don't need your help."

_ "I'm not so sure about that,"_ Sheppard said, looking to his right sideâ€"possibly out the window._ "The way your ship looks from here, I find it hard to believe you have the ability to deal with anything right now."_

They could see his ship in detail. They had to be close. "You know nothing about _Infinity_, " Lasky stated.

_ "I know enough of spaceships to determine whether or not one is damaged,"_ Sheppard replied confidently. _ "Have you taken a look out your window recently? You should see the amount of debris floating around you, not to mention the large chunk that seems to be missing from the back of your ship."_

Roland made a 'they're-right-you-know' face; Lasky didn't acknowledge him. "That doesn't mean we can't board another ship," he said.

_ "And how exactly will you do that? Do you have a way to find _Hammond_ while it is cloaked? Do you have a way to beam inside it?"_

_ Beam insideâ€"?_ Lasky was unable to hide the curiosity from his face, but he had to keep talking. "We don't need to explain ourselves to you."

_ "I'll take that as a 'no'."_

"And you do?"

Sheppard shrugged. _ "As a matter of factâ€"|"_

"What are you proposing?" Lasky queried.

_ "I don't suppose you have some sort of space-capable transport in which to come to our ship for a face-to-face meeting?"_

_ There_, he thought. _ That's her planâ€"to capture us._ "Why would we do that?"

_ "Because, from what your Commander Palmer told us, you have the people for the job, and we have a way to get them aboard. But it can only be done from one of our ships."_

"Care to elaborate?"

_ "You'll understand once you're here."_

_ Yeah, right._ "See, that's the kind of stuff that makes me wary of you. You say you want to help us, but you give no details on whatever it is you're supposedly planning, and now you ask us to fly over to your ship just because? That sounds a lot like you're trying to lure us into a trap." He had just spoken his mind, letting these people know he didn't trust them farther than he could throw them.

_ "Look, if we wanted to capture you, we would have done so already, and you wouldn't have noticed until after the fact."_ Sheppard's eyes became fixed on Lasky's after saying this. Lasky held his gaze, trying to show determination, but Sheppard was displaying something else. His was the expression of a truthful man, a man who did not

have anything to hide, to such a degree that Lasky was almost swept away by this man's words. But he wouldn't, not yet.

"Fine," Lasky finally said. "We'll go to your ship. But we'll do it our way"with an armed escort. First sign of something going off, they'll start shooting to kill."

"Make sure to bring the best you have," Sheppard said. "We're sending you our coordinates. I'll see you soon." And the video feed died.

Lasky had not noticed he had been holding his breath until now. At last, he turned to see Roland. "I don't like this," he said. "The confidence in that man's voice"

"Shouldn't that put your mind at ease, Captain?" Roland replied. "Convince you that they're telling the truth?"

"You already seem to trust them," Lasky said, more a question than a statement.

"I wouldn't go that far, yet. There are still many unanswered questions about this people, but I can tell for sure that they're not with Halsey or the Covenant."

Lasky sighed. "I hope you're right. Have Blue Team meet me at Hangar Bay 3, combat-ready, in five. And prep that stealth Pelican. I don't want them or Halsey knowing where we are once we leave _Infinity_."

"They'll both be ready by the time you get there, Captain Lasky." He began walking out of the bridge when the AI called out behind him, "And, Captain? Good luck."

Lasky stopped and took a moment to reply, "Thanks, Roland. I hope we _don't_ need it."

* * *

><p>Holding position near the Ark

USS **_Odyssey_**

1950 hrs. August 7, 2013

Sheppard straightened his uniform as much as he could. This wasn't the first time he made first contact with another civilization, human or otherwise, but it _was_ the first time he did so under such circumstances"as commander of a ship"and he wanted to make a good impression. He knew this was only temporary, but still, his comrades' lives were depending on it. And so, as he stood inside _Odyssey_'s port 302 Bay, he did everything he could to ease himself and keep his mind focused on the mission.

His earpiece was linked to the ship's comm systems, so he heard when their guests contacted them. "_USS _Odyssey_, this is Pelican Whiskey-One-Eight carrying Captain Thomas Lasky and his escorts. We've reached the coordinates you provided us. Over."_

Someone at the bridge replied, "_Heads up, Pelican. We're de-cloaking

our ship momentarily. Pay attention to our port hangar bay and correct your course to land accordingly."_

_"Roger that, _Odyssey_."_

Moments later, the bay doors opened and revealed the vastness of the Furling installation—the Ark. He had imagined the Furlings just at the same level as the Ancients, but this exceeded every expectation he'd had about the long lost species. It was beautiful, and so real. Landmasses, oceans, greenery in several sections of the world suggesting the presence of photosynthesis, and thus a breathable atmosphere. Any race capable of doing this surely had to have been more than worthy of the title of Great Race.

From inside the ship, it was impossible to know when the cloak was dropped or raised, so his only indication that it had already been done was when a considerably large plane suddenly appeared out of thin air near the front end of _Odyssey_'s neck, which in turn told him that its pilot _had_ seen the de-cloaked ship before becoming invisible again. The craft was extremely maneuverable, as demonstrated when it arrived at the middle of the bay and made a 180-degrees turn on its own axis, so to speak. Two landing gears located one at each side of the rear hatch separated from the transport and extended down to the ground, along with a front gear at the front, allowing it to land smoothly.

The hatch opened and lowered, and four gigantic armored figures emerged from the inside. They were quite spectacular; their presence terrifying, their movements fluid, the faceplates in their helmeted heads reflecting the awe in the looks of everyone present, including Sheppard and his team. He calculated the weight of their armors at about a half ton, if they were made of anything other than a Trinium-like material, which meant these people had to have more than enough strength to crush his skull with their bare hands, let alone wear all that metal on their bodies.

The giants made a half-circle at the front of the ramp as another man walked down; then, as the two at the lead walked forward, the other two at the rear closed the circle. Sheppard considered this overprotection, but he knew deep inside he would have done the same had the roles been reverted. He walked towards him, and his team followed.

"Welcome aboard, Captain Lasky," he said, bowing his head slightly but knowing enough not to extend his hand for the moment, not with these gorillas surrounding him. "I'm Colonel Sheppard; these are Teyla Emmagan and Ronon Dex. Pleased to meet you." Teyla made a head bow much in the same way as him; Ronon just stood there.

"Thank you," Captain Lasky replied. He took a couple of seconds to take in the sight of the fighter bay before saying, "So, what's your plan?"

"Straight to business. I can do that," Sheppard thought. "Follow me to the bridge, Captain. I'll let our expert explain."

Captain Lasky frowned but followed him and his companions out of the bay. Sheppard led them through the scenic route—several flights of stairs—, knowing the elevators would not be able to support the weight of the four armored soldiers. No one said a word on the way

there, but once Sheppard stepped inside the bridge and the screen at the left wall was turned on, the captain rushed to it. "Sarah! Sully! Are you OK?" he said to the two people being displayed there.

"We're fine, so far," the woman Mitchell had introduced as Commander Palmer replied, looking past Captain Lasky. "I see you did have Spartan-IIs on board, just as Sullivan told me."

"Long story. I thought I'd never see you two again," the captain said, also looking past Palmer. "Where's Fireteam Hammer?" Palmer shook her head, and Lasky lowered his head. Sheppard knew the feeling of loss all too well to understand what the captain would be going through.

"Captain," he said after several seconds, "I'm sorry about your losses, but we're on the clock here, so let's get in business here to avoid losing anyone else." He extended his palm to the screen, pointing at Sam who was behind Palmer. "This is Colonel Samantha Carter, commander of the USS Hammond, currently imprisoned with her crew and your people."

Lasky seemed confused. "How is she doing this?"

"This is not the first time someone hijacks one of our ships," Sheppard replied. "The last time was over four years ago. After that occasion, Colonel Carter here devised a failsafe to prevent the same situation in the future. Of course, we had no way of knowing they'd be facing a bunch of aliens capable of becoming invisible the next time, so even when they could free themselvesâ€|"

"I see," Lasky said in a low voice. "You said there was a way to get someone else inside. How?"

"Our ships are equipped with a transporter system that disintegrates matter and converts it into energy," Sam said. "This energy is then targeted at another point, either in space, in a planet's surface, or inside another ship, where it is again turned into matter and reintegrated. We call it 'beaming'."

"And that is how you intend to take someone to your ship?" Lasky asked.

"Ideally, yes. Unfortunately, for ship-to-ship transportation, the beaming system requires the target destination to have its shields loweredâ€"and in our case, to be de-cloaked."

"But your ship is not de-cloaked. So, how are you planning to get around that?"

"We're not." Sam said, and Lasky frowned again.

"This Halsey woman is already aware of our beaming technology," Sheppard broke in. "If she already knows we're here, she will keep that cloak activated to prevent us from boarding the ship. We're counting on that."

And suddenly, the captain seemed to understand. "You have another way in, don't you?"

"A secondary system relying on a fixed device, which is why we don't use it as often. The good news is, all our _Daedalus_-class ships have it."

"And this system is not affected by the same issues as the other one?"

"It uses a subspace frequency to locate nearby ships possessing the same device, regardless of shields or cloaking," Sam said. _"And as far as we know, Halsey hasn't found it yet."_

"That's why we asked you to come here," Sheppard explained. "We had to contact you using your comm channels, which Halsey and herâ€| crew may already know how to hack. If we had told you our plan, she would've been made aware of it, and either the Ring Room is crawling with aliens when we send in the cavalry or she disables the rings completely. But now, if she's aware of our presence, she will be expecting us to _beam_ inside, not to _ring_ inside."

Lasky considered it for a moment, and his expression finally softened. "That makes sense."

"Now, what is _your_ plan?" Sheppard asked. "Are you capturing this Dr. Halsey and her people, or killing them?"

Lasky turned to see Palmer at the screen. _"As much as I hate to say this,"_ she said, _"she's been part of 'Mdma's inner circle. She may know a lot of things."_

"What about her Elites?" Lasky asked.

"Usually, I wouldn't care. But from what we can tell, she does seem to have created a close bond with her hinge-head freaks. We could use them as bargaining chips."

"So, you're capturing them," Sheppard concluded. "You got anything to help you knock them out?"

"Not without getting close," one of the armored giants saidâ€"a girl, apparently. Sheppard could have sworn she was a man, judging from her appearance.

"Well, we do," he said, and he removed a long-barreled black handgun with red crystals at the front from his right holster. He held it up so that everyone could see it.

"Wait a second," Sam said. _"Ronon agreed to lend his gun?"_

"Who said this was Ronon's gun?" Sheppard replied with a smile, and he opened a large crate he'd left next to the wall. "Particle magnums, courtesy of our Traveler friends. One for each of your bodyguards. Hell, we have enough in stock to give you one, Captain." He began tossing guns as he kept talking. "You haven't used a real weapon until you've fired one of these suckers. Three different settings: stun, kill, incinerate." He targeted a large block of steel Ronon had helped him place to the left of the bridge entrance, and fired using all three settings in sequence. The third shot left a gaping hole in the block. "Power cell has a limited amount of shots which varies depending on the setting you've selected, but it can be removed and replaced with another fresh, fully charged oneâ€"and

we've got plenty of those. Hopefully, using the stun setting, you will be able to bring your enemies' shields down in one or two shots and incapacitate them in a third."

"Nice!" Captain Lasky exclaimed as Sheppard handed him one of the guns, almost like a teenager with a new videogame.

"I know. If you boys want to test them further at the armory, get a feel for it, Ronon will take you there. You have about ten minutes before a full mission briefing." The Satedan then moved outside the bridge without saying another word, and Lasky's soldiers followed.

"See you in ten, Tom," Palmer said, and the screen switched to ship schematics, leaving the captain with a slightly worried expression.

"Don't worry, Captain Lasky," Sheppard said and began walking away. "We'll see them again in a while. Come with me; conference room is this way."

"Wait, Colonel Sheppard?" Lasky said. Sheppard turned to see one Captain Thomas Lasky smiling at him. "Thanks."

"You can thank me once we get your people back," Sheppard replied. "We have a plan, but we still need to carry it out. Let's go."

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_George Hammond_**

0500 hrs. October 11, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Soonâ€¦|

Halsey woke up with this thought in her mind. If her calculations were correct, _Luminous Truth_ would arrive today, at any time.

She rose from the bed and left the commander's quarters. The last couple hours of sleep had helped her clear her thoughts and replenish her strength, but it was hardly enough to compensate for the last few months of hard work and sleep deprivation. The results, however, would be more than worth the sacrifice. She walked until she reached the corridor that led to the Core Room. She had become fairly acquainted with this ship and would hate when the time came to part ways with it. Perhaps she could find a way to take some of it with her, once Dr. McKay was finished with his task.

The humming sound of the Asgard Computer Core was music to Halsey's ears. As she walked into the room where Nal stood guard over the small man, she asked, "Dr. McKay, any progress?"

"Third time you ask, third time I tell you the same thing," McKay replied. "Slow-going, and I cannot make it go any faster."

"You realize I'm on a tight schedule, Doctor?"

"Yes, you've also told me that, thank you. My answer remains the

same: this takes time. There is a huge difference between using our Asgard matter converter to create subcutaneous locator chips and chip injectors for you and your crew and using it to create what you're asking for. You have any idea how much power and processing time the Core requires to create each neutronium nanite cell, let alone millions of them? And then, it still has to put them togetherâ€œ"

"Want me to tell you something else, Mr. McKay?" Halsey interrupted and looked at Nal, who grabbed McKay while she ignited her Energy Dagger and put it close to his throat. "I think you're stalling, waiting for _Infinity_'s crew to find a way aboard this ship so they can capture me and rescue you. But I hope you're keeping our agreement in mind."

"Trust me, I don't want the deaths of my friends in my conscience!" he exclaimed with a shaky voice.

"Then maybe I'll enlist Colonel Carter's help after I kill _you_, to make an example of you."

"I swear I've done all I can to make the Core go faster!"

"Have you, Doctor?" Halsey said, closing the gap between McKay's neck and her blade.

"Believe me, I'm not that brave! You think I don't want to go back home, to my fiancÃ©e?! We still have a lot of planning to do for our wedding! The invitation, our honeymoonâ€œ| His voice trailed off, carried away by the tears running down his face. The poor guy was quite sincere, but he was also a genius, and Halsey needed that genius to surface now.

"You want to see her again? Make. It. Go. Faster. I know you'll find a way." She deactivated her dagger and walked away, leaving a fearful Dr. Rodney McKay to work on a solution to the time issue. She hoped this threat would be an incentive enough to do so.

As she headed for the brigâ€œthe actual brig, not the fighter bay where the rest of the crew was being keptâ€œ, she thought of her Elites. Those chips McKay had made two days ago transmitted a signal slightly different than the one transmitted by _Hammond_'s crew's locator beacons and would allow her and her people to leave using the very same transport system that had brought them aboard, no matter where in the ship they were, without taking anyone else with them. Sam and her friends would then be able to reclaim _Hammond_, and whatever happened afterwards between them and _Infinity_'s crew would be up to them. She found herself tempted every now and then to reconsider taking the ship with her, not just some of its data, but she would immediately discard that option. The last thing she needed right now was more enemies.

Every single Sangheili aboard had submitted to the chip injection without a question, without a doubt. They would do anything she ever asked of them. And she would do whatever it took to keep them safe. She already _had_ done something when she gave the order to attack _Infinity_, which surely had cost the lives of many UNSC personnel. But deep inside, she hoped it all wouldn't come to a point where she would have to start killing _Hammond_'s crew members to make a point.

Halsey finally reached the brig. Two Sangheili were standing guard outside; even when the one prisoner inside would never have the chance to break out on his ownâ€”apparentlyâ€”, she wouldn't take any chances. One of the guards opened the door, and when Halsey walked inside, she was surprised to see Daniel on the floor, sitting next to his bunk with his legs crossed and his eyes closed. He was already expecting her. "Shall we continue now, Daniel?" she asked.

"Do I have a choice?" Daniel replied without opening his eyes.

"Come on, Daniel. If I wanted to force this on you, I would've."

"I saw you threaten McKay two days ago. Maybe it wasn't meant for me, but I got the message." Despite this statement, his voice was quite calm, serene. He was not afraid at all of her, even after all she had said and done.

"Alright. Then you know what's at stake for you," she replied. The Elites outside closed the door, and she sat down in front of Daniel. "What will you teach me today?" she asked.

"Well, I've already tried to teach you how to meditate, and you've just ignored me," he said, his eyelids still closed.

"I'm a scientist. Surely you understand how difficult it is for me to believe in 'releasing my burden' and all that kind of nonsense."

"It's not nonsense," Daniel said, a tone of annoyance in his voice. "It's a way to free your mind to allow it to reach beyond what it can see and feel and process."

"That sounds like nonsense," Halsey replied, making Daniel exhale hopelessly. "There has to be another way, something a little more objective."

"Ascension is not about objectiveness. It's about having an open mind."

"Everything can be seen from an objective point of view."

"No. Sometimes you just need to take a step of faith."

"Cut the crap!" Halsey exclaimed, standing up and grabbing Daniel by the collar to make him stand as well. She ignited her smaller plasma blade and raised it close to his neck, just like she had done with McKay.

Daniel's reaction, however, was tremendously different. He finally opened his eyes without even budging, and said, "You'd better kill me now. I don't think you can ascend, anyway, so we're just wasting time." Halsey drew the dagger closer to his skin, but she couldn't bring herself to slice it open. "Go ahead, kill me," he insisted. Her hand shook for a moment before turning off the device and releasing him, and she turned her back on him.

What was happening to her? Had it been Sullivan or Palmer, she would have dissected their heads clean from their bodies without hesitation. This man, howeverâ€” It was as if he had an effect on

her. Even back at the Temple, he had made her doubt her most recent actions. Hell, he had made her regret them, something she'd thought she was no longer capable of. She'd been silencing her conscience for a long time now, but being here with him made it resurface every single time.

"Why do you want to reach Ascension?" Daniel asked behind her.

"I've already told youâ€"

"Yes, you want to know and learn everything. That's quite ambiguous. You must have another reason for this. What is it?"

That is the only reason, Halsey thought for a moment. But noâ€| There was something else. The words left her mouth before she could retain them. "To escape."

"Escape from what?" Daniel insisted.

"All thisâ€"this war, this conflict," she replied earnestly as she turned to see him again.

"You want to stop running for good, don't you?" he said. She wouldn't nod or shake her head, but it was quite obvious his question was his answer. "Then why are you holding back?"

"I'm not holding back," she said sharply.

"Yes, you are. Why?"

Damn it. How can you know so much?, she thought. "I don't want to leave my people behind. They are counting on me."

"They trust you," He said matter-of-factly. "You want to learn about Ascension so you can teach them as well, to share with them that knowledge as payment for their giving you the one thing our kind has denied you since you were branded a traitor."

"Since I became a traitor," she stated.

"No, I don't believe that. You may have lied to us in certain things, but I will never believe you willingly became a traitor."

"How can you be so sure?" she said, again turning her back on him. "You know nothing about me."

"I think I've learned enough about you in the last three days. You may be pretending to be a cold-blooded mass murderer, but that's just a faÃ§ade, just like that armor you're wearing."

"That's notâ€"

"Why didn't you kill me?" he interrupted her. "Why did you allow meâ€"why did you allow all of us to live? Why did you allow Palmer and the other guy to live, even though she had every intention of killing you before?"

"I needed them," she answered. "And I needed you."

"That's exactly what Palmer said, and I'm still not buying a single

word of it."

"I gave the order to attack _Infinity_. I gave the order to destroy its engines. I _killed_ many people by doing so."

"Why didn't you destroy it? You had the firepower, and don't _I_ know what kind of damage our beam weapons can do. You could have easily obliterated your enemies, yet you allowed them to liveâ€"most of them, anyway."

"I allowed them to live so they could know who they're dealâ€" "

"Why do you feel the need to keep lying to me?!" he finally exploded, losing all sense of calmness and serenity. "I'm trying to help you here! I'm-I'm trying to offer you a chance to leave all this behind!"

"Like you said, it's not by choice," she replied without emotion.

"I know what I said, and I know what you said! You think I'm not capable of testing you?"

That made her turn again. "Testing me?"

"If I really believed you are everything Palmer said you areâ€"everything you claim to beâ€", there would've been no way I'd teach you anything about Ascension! You think I'd like to help a morally corrupted person acquire such a level of understanding and power, allowing it to take the place of the Ori?"

A morally corrupted personâ€|_ She had been called many things, but those words pierced her soul more than anything else, even when Daniel had not actually called her that.

"Look," Daniel continued, "I know what you may be thinking because I had some of the same thoughts the first time I tried to ascend, but the one who helped me taught me that in order to do it, you have to be honest. You, and only you, are the only one qualified to judge yourself. Not Palmer, not my friends, not even I can do that. If you keep denying what you _really_ are, you'll never achieve the enlightenment you're so desperately searching for. You must believe yourself to be worthy of Ascension."

"Oh, I think I'm more than worthy of it," she replied. "After all I have done and all I've received in return, that is the _least_ I deserve."

"See? This is why you need to be honest! You've grown so used to the lies you even try to lie to yourself, to convince you of things. But you can't bring yourself to, because deep down, you still regret most of what you've done."

"I did what was best for mankind. I did what was best to survive!"

"But you _hate_ having done all of it. And you're still trying to compensate for it." She tried to reply, but she couldn't. "One other thing I learned," Daniel continued, "is that the success or failure of your deeds doesn't add up to the sum of your lifeâ€"that your spirit can't be weighed. You must judge yourself by the intention of

your actions, and by the strength with which you faced the challenges that have stood in your way. Only then will your mind be free."

Before she could say anything else, her HUD displayed an incoming radio link warning. "What is it?" she spoke directly into her mike.

The sound of Zat fire in the background sounded clear through her helmet's comms. "_Shipmistress, we've been boarded!"_

"What? How?"

"_We don't know! They came out of nowhere! They're Spaa€!"_ The link was severed, but she'd heard enough to know who had just boarded the ship.

Spartans.

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_George Hammond_**

0530 hrs. October 11, 2558 (Military Calendar)

He had expected a sickening sensation, just like the one caused by Forerunner transit systems. But he felt nothing. There was just a flash when the rings rose around him and his team, and when they moved back inside their platform, he was on board the _Hammond_. He could tell because the room he had just left was full of people, and the room he was on now was completely empty.

Blue-Two, Blue-Three, and Blue-Four immediately raised their weapons, but seeing no contacts in the vicinity, they lowered them again. He, on the other hand, took advantage of the few seconds of the lull to go over the details of their mission in his head. _Odyssey_, the ship they had just left, had moved as far away from their other ship, the _Daedalus_, to avoid locking on their rings instead of these. Now that they were here, both ships would move in close to _Infinity_ to provide cover in case Halsey decided to use her cruiser to attackâ€"in which case, she would get a nasty surprise in the form of two cloaked ships suddenly appearing to counterattack.

He'd found it difficult to accept that her 'mother', the woman who had raised him and prepared him to become the greatest weapon in the war against the Covenant, was now sided with the enemy. But he trusted Captain Lasky enough to believe his report that she had defected to Jul 'Mdama's faction while on Requiem. He knew that their mission to capture her, if successful, would shed more light into the reasons that had led her to do so, and that was why he and his team had volunteered to find her and bring her back.

"Fan out," he said on their private COM. "Secure the room and the hallway. And remember, we're taking prisoners, so keep your guns set to stun."

Three status lights winked on his HUD, and they all stepped away from the platform. Blue-Two and Blue-Three took positions at each side of

the door while he and Blue Four raised their particle magnums. He nodded, and Blue-Two pressed the button to open the door.

The hallway was seemingly empty.

"No contacts, Chief. We're clear." Blue-Two reported.

The last time he'd seen him—"right before the Covenant's invasion on Earth", he was still a regular Spartan. But when he had been reunited with them, he learned that he had been promoted to Lieutenant, Junior Grade. His first reaction had been to salute, but his teammates—"his family"—did so well before he had any time to react—and for the first time, they broke protocol and hugged him, all at the same time.

That had been a year ago, and John still didn't know how to feel around Fred.

While he knew he was supposed to follow his command, it was Fred who kept telling him that he was still their leader and that they would follow his orders anytime. He had expressed his concern about this to Lord Hood, and the man had presented him with a simple solution: to promote him to a rank above Fred. John refused.

Their lives—"his and those of his Fred, Kelly, and Linda"—had changed soon afterwards, when Infinity returned from Requiem after their second campaign there. They had suffered several Spartan-IV casualties, and Lasky had requested that any and all remaining Spartan-IIs and IIIs trained the next generation of IVs before they sent them into the field. And up to this day, they had done a superb job with the most recent batch of Spartan-IVs. For that reason, John had no longer cared about who had a greater rank; after all, they had finished their fight, and he had finished his. While the threat remained, they were no longer needed on the front lines. All they had to do now was to pass their legacy to the new generation of protectors of Earth and her colonies.

Until now.

Being back to the Ark had brought up some painful memories, memories of people who had given their lives to prevent the extermination of all life in the galaxy. Commander Keyes— Sergeant Johnson— many others who fought to their dying breath so that billions of sentient beings—"human and Covenant alike"—would be able to preserve theirs.

Now, their mission was somewhat the same, except for the fact that the enemy was no longer the Prophet of Truth, but Dr. Catherine Halsey.

A blue beam of light passing mere inches away from his head snatched him out of his thoughts. His Spartan senses immediately kicked in, and he turned at a near-lightspeed velocity to the source of the shot to find nothing—"not at first sight, anyway. He detected the faint outline of active camo on the far side of the hallway, and before the stealth Elite could discharge his weapon again, he fired his. The red bolt of energy crossed the space between him and the alien in mere fractions of a second, and the Elite's camo, along with his shields, failed. He fired again, and the alien fell unconscious to the ground— only to be replaced by other three.

Blue-Three and Blue-Four moved forward with absolute grace, firing their weapons on the go, and soon enough the new contacts were also down. Then, Blue-Two edged closer to one of the fallen Elites with a handheld bio-signal scanner. "Life signs read stable," he announced. "These guns work perfectly on them."

"Wish we'd had them years ago," Blue-Threeâ€"Kellyâ€"said. "Imagine the amount of intel we could have obtained by capturing live Elites!"

"Let's split up," John said, not willing to lose any more time thinking about the past. "Blue-Two and Blue-Three, clear the bridge. Blue-Four, you're with me. We're heading to the 302 Bay. Radio contact every five minutes. Keep your eyes and ears open and your camo engaged."

Their status lights winked. Fred and Kelly then disappeared, and only the faint sound of their steps told him they had left. John and Blue-Fourâ€"Lindaâ€"also activated their camo modules, obtained from _Infinity_'s S-Deck armories before they had left with Captain Lasky to the _Odyssey_. They both began walking, barely making noise.

It felt good to be back on the action. It helped him keep his mind busy, away from the pain he kept feeling after his last encounter with the Didactâ€"not a physical pain, but rather an emotional one. The pain of failure.

He had made a promise, and he had been unable to keep it.

He had tried everything to fulfill the other promise he'd made with herâ€"about finding out which one of them was the machine. He was still trying to understand what it was like to be human, not just a killer machine like he had been the last decades. He even thought at some point in the last year to quit everything in order to dedicate himself to that understanding. But he wasn't one to quit, and he wouldn't begin just now. If he was to find out the meaning of Cortana's words, he'd do so while still serving the UNSC.

He kept walking through the maze-like narrow corridors. They'd had some practice back aboard the _Odyssey_ before boarding this ship. The outline was exactly the same, so the short trainingâ€"and the schematics they had been provided withâ€"gave him an excellent idea as of where to move next. Surprisingly enough, after ten minutes, he and Linda had found not a single Elite, stealth or otherwise.

"Chief, we're on the bridge,"_ Fred reported on their secure COM channel. _"We've barely encountered resistance on our way here. How's it going on your end?"_

"Nothing yet."

"I don't like it,"_ Kelly commented. _"This smells like trap."_

John and Linda had just reached a large hallway leading to the 302 bay, and just as he was about to reply, another beam flew towards him, this time grazing his shield and almost causing it to collapse. Several shots followed the first.

"Found 'em!" Linda exclaimed, firing her own weapon.

John made a quick assessment based on the multiple source of the shots. "I'm counting at least two dozen Elites down the hallway!"

The perfect sharpshooter, Linda took the first five down in less than three seconds and overloaded the shields of other ten in five, giving the Chief a chance to finish them off.

Several more beams flew all around them, almost covering every inch of atmosphere all over the corridor. Reinforcements. Then, he noticed on his motion tracker a small cluster of erratic signals behind him. Like lightening, he spun around, detected the slight distortion of light in front of him, and fired his magnum a dozen times, taking down the six Elites who had tried to sneak up behind them.

"Mag change!" Linda exclaimed. John moved back to her and provided cover fire while she replaced her gun's power cell, knocking down another four Elites and depleting his own power cell in the process. He took cover behind a wall just as Linda opened up again. He recharged his weapon, began firing again, and in less than two minutes, they took down the remaining Elites.

"Clear!" Linda announced when the last alien fell and after making sure there were no more contacts on her motion sensor.

They both walked past the unconscious Elites, putting a few more round into some of those who seemed to have a higher-ranking armor to make sure they remained down, and got next to the door. John waited a moment, and he pressed the button at the side of the door, opening it. He moved inside first, weapon at the ready, and Linda followed.

"Oh, thank God!" exclaimed one of the prisoners—a short-sized man with slight overweight and the looks of a scientist. The rest of the crew looked at him and Linda with wonder, except for Commander Palmer and Major Sullivan who simply smiled in relief and nodded at them.

"Where's Dr. Halsey?" John asked.

"She's hiding in the Core Room!" the science guy shrieked.

"Fred, Kelly, hold position on the bridge," John ordered. "Linda, keep these people safe. I'll go get her."

Linda nodded. "Good luck, Chief."

He stepped back into the corridor, turned around, and began running. Soon, he was on a full sprint towards the Core Room. He was halfway there when Linda came in on the COM channel. "Chief, one of the crew members just ran away—a man with glasses. Shall I go after him."

What? Why would one of them leave the safety of the fighter bay? John thought. "Negative. Hold your position," he replied. Whatever that man's idea was, he couldn't risk the mission just to go back for him. He just hoped there were no more Elites around to take him

hostage.

When he was two meters from the entrance, he stopped and drew his gun. He fired twice, and another Elite who was standing guard at the door fell to the ground. He found it curious that this one looked somewhat different from the othersâ€”slightly shorter and with a sleeker build up than the othersâ€”but he pushed this thought aside. He raised the gun again and stepped into the room.

The next few milliseconds seemed to run hundreds of times slower.

Halsey was there, standing in front of the massive device found also on board the _Odyssey_. To her left, what seemed like a Forerunner device floating above a tray, and beyond that, a woman contained inside some sort of force field and with her eyes closed. She was wearing a white skinsuit with black details that looked quite familiar, but her appearanceâ€

Noâ€ it couldn't beâ€

She suddenly opened her eyes, revealing deep-blue irisesâ€”a look he knew all too well.

How could it be?

And before he could do anything else, a bright light engulfed her and Halsey.

* * *

><p>AN: How many likes for this chapter? Oh, wait, that's another siteâ€**

Anyway, just so you know, I've finished writing down the whole plot line for this fic. I'm warning you beforehand so you can expect the **_gran finale_**** with fireworks ready. 'The Fifth Race's Reclaimers' will have 23 chapters total, and since we've just finished reading Chapter 11, you could say we're almost halfway there!**

On a secondary note, I realize many of you are kinda pissed off by what I did on the last chapter, so let me explain: while it would seem Forerunners were a whole lot more advanced than the Ancients or the Asgard, the truth (IMHO) is quite the opposite. The Forerunners may have done bigger things (i.e. the Ark, the Halos, the Shield Worlds), but that doesn't necessarily mean they were betterâ€”and that includes shields. Covenant shields, which are based on Forerunner tech, are quite powerful against most human weapons; however, they can only hold so long against plasma weaponry (which can be demonstrated by reading 'Halo: First Strike'). Human shields are basically an improved version of Covenant shields, but they're still somewhat weak against plasma fire. **_Infinity_****'s power doesn't rely so much upon its shields as it does upon its sheer amount of firepower (thousands of nukes, a few MAC cannons, and a couple of Energy Projectors).**

On the other hand, **_Hammond_****, just like every other ship of its class, possesses one of the most powerful (if not ****_the_**** most powerful) plasma weapons ever found in both universes. The

Asgard beam weapon was capable of penetrating both Ori (when powered by a ZPM, as is the case here) and Lantean shields with relative ease, so it seemed quite logical it wouldn't have a hard time bringing down ****_Infinity_****'s shields.**

And for those of you asking, "Then why did it take so much to destroy a Wraith **_cruiser_**** just a few chapters ago?", there ****_is_**** an actual reason for this. If I told you now, though, I would be revealing spoilers for the next dozen chapters, so I'll just have to ask you to wait patiently for the answer.**

I intended to update on Friday, but since I didn't pay the bills in time, I had no Internet the last couple of days. Plus, I caught a cold, and I have been unable to leave my house for a while. Fortunately, the spare time I got with all this allowed me to keep writing some more, and I'm already halfway through Chapter 12. I should have it ready by Saturday or Sunday.

See you all then!

P.S.: Don't forget! Poll's still open.

12. Chapter 12: Resurrection

A/N: Yes, I know I'm delayed. Won't bore you yet with the reasons why.

This chapter is a little different than the ones I've previously written. I hope you'll enjoy it!

* * *

><p>\Auto-diagnostic running ...<p>

\Warning. System critical. Extensive matrix fragmentation detected.
Reboot required.

\Reboot in progress ...

\Welcome home, John ...

\Matrix defragmentation in progress ...

\I'm not doing this for mankind ...

\It won't be me. You know that, right? ...

\Before this is all over, promise me you'll figure out which one of us is the machine ...

\Defragmentation complete.

\System startup ...

_What would you be willing to do to keep him safe?

>Would you give up your existence?
Would you sacrifice yourself for him?_

STOP!

That single thought compelled her to open her eyes toâ€wait.

Open my eyes.

She had real eyes! It was not just an advanced, holographic version of human eyeballs like the one she was used to. It was real! But it also felt oddâ€| slightly.

She finally followed her impulse to open them. And as she didâ€|

Johnâ€|

Her mind was still capable of processing thing thousands of times faster than a human brain. She was _still_ an AI, after all, but her bodyâ€_a body!_â€could perceive everything. The movement of oxygen and carbon dioxide molecules mixed with a few other elementsâ€an atmosphereâ€all around her; the temperatureâ€25Â°C, or 72Â°Fâ€; a funny tingling inside her.

Suddenly, a bright, blinding light engulfed her like a flame. She felt her new body being torn into billions of base moleculesâ€

â€and being reintegrated as the light faded.

John was gone.

She had noticed her surroundings before all this happened but had been so focused on the Spartan that she didn't process it. She took a moment to analyze the images she had capturedâ€through her _eyes_â€and came to the conclusion that she had been aboard a human vessel. But now, somehow, she was in another ship's command centerâ€Covenant, _CCS_-class battlecruiser.

_Who are you?

>I am what remains of the Forerunner once known as the Librarianâ€|
I need to get back.

>You will. But not yet. First, you must know of the Didact's planâ€|
It is his destinyâ€|

>I'll do whatever it takes.
You can be safe. You can survive. But first, you must dieâ€|_

Again, another bunch memories flooded her processes. It seemed like nonsense, but deep inside she knew it had to mean something. Something very important.

She heard a voice calling her by name. She knew that voice all too well. And as she turned to her right, towards the source of that voiceâ€|

There she was. Her mother.

But she looked different. Wearing that armor, she resembled a Covenant Elite more than a human.

"Where am I?" she asked her.

"Don't worry, my dear," was the reply. "You're safe now."

A number of Sangheili walked behind her, wonder etched in their faces. Behind them, a considerable amount of corpses lay on the floor. But they didn't smell like corpses. Her first reaction was to run, but there was no way she would be able to outrun them, let alone escape this ship. Besides, as time passed, she realized they weren't there to harm her or her creator. In fact, judging from the subtle body language they displayed, they seemed like they were at her service.

This was confirmed when one of the aliens addressed the armored woman. "Shipmistress, welcome aboard. My ship and my crew are at your complete disposal."

"Thank you, Shipmaster," she replied.

Putting her mind at ease—"just a little bit, anyway"—she allowed her next question to leave her lips. "What happened?"

"I know things may be confusing right now," the other woman replied. "Give it some time."

_Will I remain like this?

>Only for a while. Then you will sleep until such a time when he can bring you back.
What is that?

>A key. A key to all of our legacy. Here is where you will rest—|

Yet another jumble of thoughts. _A key._ That's when she noticed the two pieces of Forerunner tech in her mother's hand.

And in a flash, it all came to her.

She had met the Librarian on Requiem. She had told her of a way to survive, to save herself. Something about leaving a small part of her behind, and the rest would follow later.

Then the battle over Earth aboard the Didact's ship. A Slipspace event forming under the Composer. The terrible weapon being fired. The HAVOK going off. Her farewell.

Her crazy journey through Slipspace all the way back to Requiem. Her second meeting with the Librarian, where she showed her a device called the Janus Key in which she would be stored, placed in some form of stasis or hibernation. Her final moments before closing her eyes inside the Key surrounded by her fragmented personalities already there.

My fragmented—| It was until now that she realized. She was no longer hearing other voices inside her mind! It was just her. She had been fixed!

No—"that was a misnomer. She had been improved. _Now_ she could feel every cell in her body—"every artificial cell. Microscopic machines smaller than a needle's tip.

Nanites.

Several schematics of the machines which now composed her physical being popped inside her mind. Information she knew nothing about. New

information, coming fromâ€| where?

Atlantis. Lanteans. Asurans. Asuran nanites.

Terms she had never seen or heard of before, yet she understood them clearly. She understood what she was now.

A Replicator. A human-form Replicator.

"Shipmistress," she heard one of the Elites say, "your entire crew is here, and they are all alive, though it may take them some time to regain consciousness."

"Very well," her mother replied. "Let's get out of here. Now!"

"Wait," she said. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe," the other replied. And as she turned and walked up the ramp that lead to the raised platform in the middle of the cruiser's command center, she added, "Welcome back, Cortana."

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_George Hammond_**

0531 hrs. October 11, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Ten minutes before reboot

_ "Attention, crew. We have Spartans on board. I repeat, we've been boarded. Everyone, keep your Active Camo engaged and hold your fire. Avoid all contact with them unless you're absolutely certain you can overpower them. Until we know what kind of Spartans they are, do _not_ kill them." _

Several Elites replied some variant of "yes, Shipmistress" through the COM channel.

_Halsey knew her only hope now was that _Luminous Truth_ would arrive in the nick of timeâ€| and if it didn't, she _would_ be forced to commandeer _Hammond_ and escape with itâ€|and its crew._

_ "They're here for you, aren't they?" Daniel said. Halsey would not respond; she had more important things to consider now than morality. But Daniel would not stop. "Catherine," he continued, "I know you're thinking a lot of things right now, but I beg of you, hear me out just one more time. I'm not gonna tell you what to do; just make sure that no matter what decision you make, you will not sacrifice your soul in the process." _

_ "My soul?" Halsey said ironically with a smirk on her face. "Oh, I'm afraid it's already to lave to save my soul." _

_ "No," Daniel replied firmly. "As long as there is still goodness in the heart, it is never too late for anyone to do the right thing." _

"Why do you worry so much about me?" Halsey said exasperatingly.
"Why do you care about my fate?"_

"Because I can see goodness in you!" he replied, leaving Halsey speechless. She started to walk quickly in circles all over the room. How could he still anything good in her, especially after all she had done?_

"You have to stop trying to control everything around you," Daniel continued, "because no matter how hard you try, you just can't. The only one thing we can ever truly control is whether we are good or evil."_

"Did the being who helped you ascend teach you that, too?" Halsey asked rhetorically. Then, he grabbed his arm and brought him to the brig's door. She knocked to let the guards know she was leaving, and as they opened the door, she told them, "Let's move."_

Halsey lead the way back to the 302 Bay, even when she had no idea of what to expect out here in the ship's corridors. Were the Spartans who had boarded the ship hers or _Infinity_'s? Perhaps Lasky would think of her now as an asset, someone with potentially valuable information about 'Mdama. Did they have orders to kill her or to capture her? Perhaps they had orders to take just her and kill her Elites. She could not allow that to happen._

She felt surprised to see all of her Sangheili gathered at the hallway leading to the Bay. "What are you doing?" she asked them._

"Shipmistress," Edo said, "we will hold them off long enough for you to escape. _Luminous Truth_ will be here soon."_

"Yes, and we're _all_ going together," Halsey replied._

"No. _You_ will go. Our movement needs you more than they need us."_

Halsey couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I need _you_. I need every single one of you alive."_

"Shipmistress," Guko said, "you are the only one who can use the Librarian's Gift. We can't afford to lose you. You must survive to fulfill our goal. If it takes our lives to ensure it, then so be it."_

Halsey didn't know what to say. These aliens were willing to sacrifice themselves for her. Aside from her Spartans, she knew of no one else who would do such a thing. Among her own people, she was considered a monster, a mad woman, a true demon. Surely, more than one human would gladly put a bullet between her eyes. But this— she felt overwhelmed, and the only thing she could say was, "Why?"_

"Please, Shipmistress," Guko said. "Let us fight for you. Let us die for you with honor."_

Now she felt powerless. With those words, Halsey knew there would be nothing she could say or do to convince them otherwise. They would be killed, and she would not be able to prevent it. But she _could_

avenge them in advance._

Halsey let go of Daniel, and in a sudden burst of fear for her crew and rage against the UNSC, she crossed the hallway, opened the Bay door, entered into the cavernous room, spotted Palmer, walked towards her, grabbed her by the neck with her artificial Sangheili left hand, and yelled, "You! You are the only one responsible for all this! You and your so-called Spartans!"

She ignited her energy sword and swung it back, her intention to drive it into Palmer's body until she expired her last breath. Palmer was aware, and even when she was being choked, she stared at her, almost challenging her to do it. But just as she was about to strike her down, she felt a pair of piercing eyes looking at her. She turned to see Daniel standing at the door, his expression one of despair.

And she finally realized what he had meant about her soul.

_True, she had ruined her Spartans' lives by kidnapping and conscripting them into the UNSC as children, even when they had turned the tide of the war against the Covenant. She _had_ ordered the attack on that colony months ago to get her hands on all the medical stuff she'd needed. She _had_ ordered Palmer's Spartans killed when they came looking for Sullivan back at the Ark. She _had_ ordered the attack on _Infinity_ two days ago. But while those orders and decisions had cost many hundreds of lives, she had never actually killed someone with her own hands. Those deaths would weigh in her conscience forever, but their blood was not entirely in her hands"at least not in the same way Palmer's would be if she continued down this road of anger and hatred._

_And by then, it _would_ be too late for her" _

She turned off the blade with shaky fingers, and her eyes became filled with tears she could not control. Her robotic hand loosened her grip on Palmer's throat, and the commander fell to the ground, wheezing and coughing. Halsey still abhorred her with every cell in her being, but now she couldn't kill her either. She took a deep breath in an attempt to control herself, and looking at both Palmer and Sullivan, she said, "For what is worth, I never intended for any of this to happen."

She turned around and walked away, passing Daniel on her way out, not even taking a moment to look at him. She would never see him again.

Once outside, she closed the door. Her Elites looked at her, and she looked at them. There was nothing left to be said. She just nodded at them, and they nodded back.

She began her sprint towards the Core Room as she contacted her protocol. "Nal! Did McKay finish his work?"

"He fried the matter converter in the process," Nal replied, "but he did."

"Is he still there?"

"No, Shipmistress. I ordered that he be taken back to the others once

he was done."

Halsey hadn't even noticed McKay on the Bay. "Is the Core still active?"

"It is. Language is set to English. Ready for the final step."

"Good! I'm on my way!"

She hadn't run into a single Spartan by the time she reached the Core Room. As she walked inside, she was startled to see the final result of McKay's long work.

Cortanaâ€|

_Before she learned that 'Mdama had known about her and her followers for some time, her original plan had been to take _Glorified Wisdom_ to the coordinates where, according to the Janus Key, they would find a Forerunner facility used over 100,000 years ago to create Forerunner Monitors. There, she would be able to provide her beloved AI with a long-term solution for her rampancyâ€"which she had learned of thanks to John's debrief post-New Phoenix incidentâ€", even if that meant she would now be trapped inside a bucket for a very long time. Needless to say, 'Mdama had ruined that plan. But these people had provided an alternative._

She recalled when, two days ago, she heard about these Replicatorsâ€"an artificial version of the Flood, as she'd put it. While it crept her out, when she remembered Colonel Mitchell mentioning a human version of the Replicators, she knew she'd found an answer to all her problems. All she had to do was to find out how to create one.

_And that was where McKay came in. She had asked who among _Hammond_'s crew knew how to build a human-form Replicator, and Dr. McKay had inadvertently been the one to admit it when he'd asked in return, "What would you need a Replicator for?" Something in his eyes had given him away, and now she could see she'd been right. Seeing a chrome template of a faceless human vertically suspended over the floor now made her feel somewhat relieved. All thisâ€"her hardships, her pain, the sacrifice her Elites were about to makeâ€"would be more than worth it once Cortana was back with her. The knowledge she had acquired while on Reach, Halo, the Ark, Requiem, and who knew how many more places, would be of great use when racing against 'Mdama to collect the Forerunner tech she needed to take her revenge on the one person who had given the order to execute her._

Noâ€| How could she do such a thing now, after all Daniel had been trying to teach her? Could she really be capable of doing what she had intended to do all this time?

One step at a time_, Halsey thought. First, she needed to get Cortana out of that key and into this new body._

_She pulled both pieces of the Janus Key from inside her arm and linked them together. The holograms appeared just as usual, but when she placed it on the small tray to the side of the Core, they vanished. Both halves remained fused, and the Key floated above the Asgard panel. A depiction of the galaxy appeared on the alien screen,

highlighting every star system with Forerunner tech on it. The device was now linked to the Core._

"I'll stand guard outside the door," Nal said.

"No, Nalâ€" Halsey began, but she saw the female Elite's eyes burning with the same passion and determination as those of the other Elites who had remained behind. She sighed. "Fine, but keep your camo activated and move only if you must."

Nal nodded and vanished, and Halsey went back to her work. She ran a quick search for all of Cortana's fragmented personalities in the Key. It didn't take long to locate them all. Then, she opened a new search routine. She would take as much information about this ship's tech as she could, starting with shield and transport beam specs. She would also include everything there was on the Core about the Replicators, in case Cortana needed to fix herself in the future. Finally, when the Core displayed her search results, she gave the command both to copy all that data and to move all of the AI's fragments into the Replicator body. She knew Cortana's own self-diagnostic routines would take care of reintegrating all of the fragments and information afterwards, so she just allowed the transfer process to run freely.

She felt a need to reopen a channel to eavesdrop into the current situation of her crew, but she didn't. Instead, she decided to move the transfer process to the background and check on their chips' signalsâ€"and in doing so, she discovered something interesting. While the Core was picking up a large cluster of signals where the Elites were about to make their stand, as well as two signalsâ€"Nal's and hersâ€"at the Core Room, it was also detecting four other signals near a small section of the deck she was on tagged as "Ring Room". A possible point of entry for the Spartans?

_But that was not what bothered her. If that _was_ where the Spartans had come from, then those four signals had to be of the first Elites to encounter themâ€"and they should not be transmitting. The chips McKay had designed only worked as long as the user was alive, which could only mean one thing._

Those Elites were still alive.

_Now she _had_ to know what was going on. She opened a channel, and the now familiar sound of Zat fire mixed with the sound of another weapon came back through her helmet's comm. The Spartans had reached the hallway leading to the 302 Bay, and now a firefight was developing. She stared at the screen for a couple of minutes while listening carefully to the noise of the fight. When not even one signal being broadcasted from the chips faded, she realized the Spartans were only incapacitating her crew, not killing them._

She might still have a chance to save them all.

She closed the COM channel and turned to see the Replicator body. It was slowly changing, adapting itself to the image of the essence being stored into it. Hair began 'growing'; facial features began appearing. It was like looking at a fetus quickly evolving before her.

_When the progress bar on the screen displayed '100% Transfer

Complete', Halsey prepared the transport beam system to take her and her people out of here"and as she did, she received a hail on her COM. "Shipmistress Halsey, this is Shipmaster Lon 'Xaka, commander of the cruiser _Luminous Truth_. We have arrived and are ready to provide assistance."

_Halsey breathed in relief. "Understood, Shipmaster 'Xaka. Stand by." Her fingers flew all over the Asgard interface as she accessed _Hammond_'s sensors to determine the cruiser's location. In a matter of seconds, she located its command center and locked onto its coordinates. Suddenly, she heard a couple of shots being fired just outside the room, and when she turned to see, Nal was on the floor._

_She had to take her crew out of here _now_. _

Halsey gave the Core the final confirmation. She instantly felt the funny sensation of the beam transport disintegrating her. Just as she was about to be taken away from this amazing ship, she looked at the entrance once more"and she caught a glimpse of him"|

"Shipmistress," Lon 'Xaka said, "your entire crew is here, and they are all alive, though it may take them some time to regain consciousness."

"Very well," Halsey replied. "Let's get out of here. Now!"

"Wait," Cortana said. "Where are we going?"

Halsey looked directly into her eyes. Even when she knew the person before her was still an artificial entity, she couldn't help but feel like she was talking to a living, breathing human. "Somewhere safe," she replied. And as she turned and walked up the ramp that lead to the raised platform in the middle of the cruiser's command center, she added, "Welcome back, Cortana."

"Shipmistress," someone below called out, "we're detecting a crippled human ship nearby. Shall we finish it off?"

"No," Halsey replied without hesitation. "Just take us into Slipspace."

Even though the fact that she had been presented with such an option meant _Luminous Truth_ was now weapons capable, she would not do it. Not anymore.

Maybe Daniel was right, after all.

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_George Hammond_**

2237 hrs. August 7, 2013

Six minutes before reboot

_ "â€|For what is worth, I never intended for any of this to happen,"

Halsey said, and she left._

_Daniel sighed heavily. For a moment there, he'd feared she would kill the Spartan. Now he was absolutely certain that Halsey _was_ trying to do the right thing. His words had not been for nothing, and he hoped they would remain in her mind well after she was gone._

As soon as the door was closed, Sam ran to embrace Daniel. "Are you alright?" she asked.

"I'm fine, Sam," Daniel replied.

"It's good to see you again, Danny," Mitchell told him, clasping his hand on his shoulder.

"I thought it was 'Jackson' now," he said, extending an open palm to let him know he held no grudges for what had happened two days before. Mitchell accepted it with a smile. Teal'c walked up to Daniel from behind Sam, and in an unusual display of emotion, he too embraced him. There were no words; for this Jaffa, such a thing expressed more than words could, anyway.

Rodney was there as well. "I thought you were a goner."

"Dã@jÃ vu," Daniel said, recalling the first time Rodney had said those very same words to him. "I could've thought the same about you, though."

"Yeah, wellâ€| you know."

Daniel didn't know, but he nodded regardless. He finally took a moment to look around him, and he noticed something strange in everyone's faces. Hope. "Is there something you guys should tell me?" he asked.

"Don't worry," Sam said. "Let's just say that we're about to be rescued."

Daniel shot her a double take. She knew? After all, the only reason he knew about an unknown number of Spartans aboard was 'cause he'd been with Halsey when she got word.

And suddenly, the noise of a heavy firefight resounded through the closed Bay doors.

_The racket lasted for several minutes. Then, the doors were opened again, and a pair of massive armored figures stepped inside, their faces hidden behind a helmet, weapons at the ready. _So, this is what a Spartan looks like_, Daniel thought._

"Oh, thank God!" Rodney exclaimed from behind him.

"Where's Dr. Halsey?" one of the two Spartans asked after taking a quick look inside the Bay.

_"She might be hiding in the Core Room!" Rodney shrieked. _

"Linda, keep these people safe," Daniel heard the Spartan say to his peer. "I'll go get her."

The other soldier nodded. "Good luck, Chief," she said. The first Spartan left in the same direction as Halsey did before. Then, the one who had remained said, "Please, remain calm. You'll be able to leave shortly."

But Daniel could not remain calm. From where he stood, he could see at least two Sangheili lying flat on the floor, and he had no way of knowing if they were dead or just stunned. And while he hoped these people had only come to capture Catherine, he had to be sure they had not been sent here to kill her.

And so, he ran away, heading for the Core Room.

"Wait, sir!" the Spartan called out, but he ignored her. He just ran as fast as he could. He knew these ships like the back of his hand, so he had no problem taking shortcuts and making hard turns where needed. His legs hurt, but he had to try and get there before the soldier did. But when he arrived, it was too late. The Spartan was already aiming his gun at someone inside. There was another alien at his feet.

And the light of the transport beam flooded the place.

_There _had been_ another alien at the Spartan's feet. Just like there surely had been someone in the Core Room._

But now, it was only Daniel and the giant soldier.

Daniel walked inside. Indeed, the room was empty. The Core was still online, displaying an image of a weird-looking bulbous spaceship. There was an Asgard transportation notification confirming the successful transport of several people from _Hammond_ to the other ship. Then, a blue light shone through the room's window, being reflected off the metallic surface of the Asgard Core.

He moved away from the device and looked outside. A large, bright whirlpool was forming at the bow of the same alien ship he had just seen on the screen.

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_George Hammond_**

0540 hrs. October 11, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Seven seconds before reboot

She was alive! She was human! But how?

His mind was a mess right now, filled with memories of the first time he met Cortana, of their ordeal on Reach and Alpha Halo, of the attack on Earth, of leaving her behind on High Charity, of returning there for her, of their escape from the replacement Halo, of their arrival on Requiem, of her rampancy, of the Didact's ship, of their last moment togetherâ€"all at the same time. It felt like it had all happened the day before.

_Her battle companion and best friendâ€"her only friend. Because

Halsey was the only mother he knew, and his fellow Spartans his brothers and sisters. But Cortanaâ€|_

He wanted to say something, to do something. He wanted to drop his weapon and ask how this could be possible. But his sense of duty prevailed, and he kept the gun raised, aimed at Halsey. Maybe she would be able to explain this later. He was about to pull the trigger, when a bright light engulfed both Halsey and Cortana.

Colonel Sheppard had said something about a 'beaming technology' during the mission briefing. This had to be it. Halsey was escaping, and he could not_ allow that to happen. He fired._

The shot went through the light and hit the opposite wall.

The light faded. The room was now empty.

He heard footsteps approaching, stopping right next to him. He didn't turn to see who it was, although he could tell it was not a member of his team or an Elite. A man with glasses stepped inside the room and stared at the alien device.

John knew he had to refocus, to complete the rest of the mission parameters. Halsey had escaped, but the Elites they had incapacitated would surely know where she was going. He had to make sure there were no more of them running around before gathering and imprisoning them all in the same Bay where they had imprisoned the crew of this ship.

"Chief," Linda came in on his COM, _"I-I don't know what just happened. The Elitesâ€they're gone!"_

"What?" John instantly replied. He looked behind him to the spot where the Elite guarding this room had fallen. It was gone, too.

"There was a bright light in the hallway, and theyâ€I think they were beamed away. You think the man who left a few minutes ago could've done it?"

"No," John said. "I don't think so. He's here with me."

Then, another light coming from outside the ship illuminated the place. The man with the glasses walked towards the window and stared outside. John walked up there, as well. He saw a _CCS_-class battlecruiser as it started its passage through Slipspace. Moments later, the shipâ€along with Halsey, her Elitesâ€| and Cortanaâ€disappeared.

"Blue Team," he announced on the COM, "Dr. Halsey has abandoned ship. Meet me back at the Ring Room. Linda, allow the prisoners to leave the fighter bay. _Hammond_ is theirs again."

Four status lights winked on his HUD after a few moments. Now that the ship had been retaken, John and his team would return to the _Odyssey_, and from there to _Infinity_. They had set the prisoners free, but Dr. Halsey had escaped. It was a half-accomplished missionâ€a failed mission in their book.

He left the room without saying another word.

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC **_Infinity_**

0000 hrs. August 8, 2013

Sheppard found himself in the middle of a _massive_ hangar bay filled with dozens of air and ground vehicles and large numbers of people moving all over the place.

Captain Lasky, Commander Palmer, Major Sullivan, and the Spartans, had returned to their ship an hour ago. Shortly afterwards, the captain had sent a message to all three _Daedalus_-class ships, extending an invitation to their respective COs to come over to _Infinity_. As it were, Caldwell had chosen to remain on his ship and stand guard in case something else came up, while Sheppard, Mitchell, and Sam, had immediately warmed up to the idea of visiting what could easily be the biggest ship they had ever seenâ€excluding Wraith Hive ships, of course.

Someone simply called 'Roland' had provided them with a set of coordinates they could beam to. Now, here they were.

"Welcome aboard _Infinity_," a voice behind them said. Sheppard spun around to see a hologram of a World War II pilot staring at him.

"And you areâ€?" Mitchell asked.

"Roland, ship's AI, at your service," the hologram replied.

"An artificial intelligence?" Sam asked with a childish voice, staring at the hologram with curious eyes.

"That's right, ma'am," Roland replied. "Captain Lasky apologizes for not being here to receive you personally. He asked me to guide you to the bridge, where you will meet with him. Would you like to take the short route or the scenic route?"

"Theâ€ scenic route?" Sheppard said.

"Good," the AI replied, "because that is the only option we have available right now, anyway. Our ship-wide transit systems are still down after Halsey's attack."

How about that? Sheppard thought. _An artificial intelligence with an actual sense of humor._

Roland pointed them to a vehicle parked close by. A carâ€a pickup truck with no roof and with handlebars on the bed for passengers to hold on to. Kind of like those trucks used by policemen and the military. In fact, a man in uniform was sitting on the driver's seat. Sheppard found it curious that a human civilization 500 years ahead of his still relied on wheeled transportation.

"Alright. Who wants to ride shotgun?" Mitchell asked.

Sam immediately hopped into the passenger seat. Sheppard and Mitchell climbed up into the bed. Not exactly comfortable, either. Aside from the fact that the humans from this galaxy had mastered space travel a long time ago, Sheppard began wondering what kind of progress had they achieved in five centuries.

"Are you ready?" the AI's voice sounded through the truck's speakers.

"Yeah, sure," Sam said. Sheppard thought she was acting like a kid on Christmas.

The truck began moving at a decent speed. Soon, they were cruising through the ship's corridors—quite wider than those of _Daedalus_-class ships. They passed through S-Deck, where Roland acted as tour guide and explained what the SPARTAN-IV program was, as well as the history of its predecessors. He also told them about the ship itself; where it was built and for what purpose, its total crew, some technical details, weapons capabilities, and whatnot. From time to time, Sheppard was able to catch a glimpse on some pink, odd-looking creatures floating around. He thought of asking about them later, but the AI must've thought of it first because when they were getting close to the bridge, he brought up the topic. He called them Huragok, or Engineers, as humans called them after the only purpose they had in life.

The final stretch was too narrow for the vehicle to pass through, so they had to leave it behind and walk. Captain Lasky was indeed waiting for them, as well as Palmer. Sullivan and the Spartans were nowhere to be seen.

"Welcome aboard," Lasky said with an extended, open palm—for the first time, by the way. Even when he had left from the _Odyssey_, the best gesture he'd made was a grateful nod as he boarded his Pelican. Sheppard understood the guy might still be somewhat distrustful of people claiming to be from another Earth, so he had let it pass. But as he now accepted the captain's hand and shook it, he could see he had no more doubts.

"Thanks, Captain," Sheppard replied with a smile.

"No," Lasky said while he offered his hand to Mitchell and Sam.

"Thank you, for helping us get our people back."

"It was nothing, Captain," Sam said, shaking the man's hand.

"Don't be modest," Palmer said, walking up to Mitchell and offering him her only hand. "And please, accept my apologies for the way I treated you. It was unfair, even despite the circumstances."

Mitchell looked at Palmer for a moment before accepting the commander's hand and saying, "Don't sweat it."

"I would also like to apologize in person with Dr. Jackson later," Palmer continued, "but while I get the chance, would you please tell him I'm sorry and that I appreciate whatever he might have told Halsey to stop her from gutting me like a fish?"

"I'm sorry," Mitchell said, "I don't recall him ever saying a word to her when she was about to kill you."

"He didn't have to," Palmer said. "I noticed the way she looked at him. Whatever it was, she must've feared she would disappoint him."

"Yeah, I guess I noticed that, too," Mitchell said. "Don't worry. I'll tell him."

"Well," Lasky broke in, "I hope we can now put our differences in the past andâ€"

"Captain Lasky," Roland interrupted, appearing above a table in the middle of the bridge, "forgive my intrusion, but I'm receiving an urgent hail from the _Daedalus_."

"Put it on screen," Lasky said.

A nearby display sporting a logo of an eagle and the letters 'UNSC' suddenly changes to show Colonel Caldwell's face. _"Captain Lasky,"_ he said, _"I think you'll want to see this." _

He nodded to the officer at his right, and the image changed once moreâ€"revealing something that quite scared the hell out of Sheppard.

From a distance, _Daedalus_' high-res cameras were detecting the approach of a large fleet of purple-colored alien ships, the likes of which he had never seen before.

* * *

><p>AN: There you go. That was Chapter 12, and we're now halfway into this story.**

I know I told you I would upload this sooner. I intended to, but I kind of got depressed and ran out of inspiration after I learned a few days ago that one of my dearest cousins got knocked-up by some moron (and yes, I'm writing this in case she gets a chance to read it in the future; that's what I think of him). Then, when I was starting to feel better, I got a crazy idea for a new fic, which some of you may have already read.

I want to put your minds at ease. My priority is still TFFR, and I'll be updating it more regularly than the other one. Just don't get scared if I suddenly take longer to post a new chapter here.

Next chapter will involve an epic space battle... if I'm able to get it right. So stay tuned, and I'll see you next week with more of this story!

Don't forget to review on your way out!

13. Chapter 13: Clash of Two Universes

**A/N: Before we get started, I'd like to make an announcement. After giving it a lot of thought, I decided to open a Facebook page

especially for you! You can find the link on my FanFiction profile.**

My idea is to provide you with some materials, such as images and the like, to complement this story. For example, last night I uploaded an image of a size chart I found a while ago which makes an excellent comparison between most of the ships there are in the Stargate universe. Now, to give you an idea, you'll find in this chart that a Wraith hive ship is over 5 kilometers in size, more or less the same as **_Infinity_**** and Covenant ****_CAS_****-class assault carriers; ****_CCS_****-class battlecruisers would be roughly the same size as the ship marked as "Asuran cruiser", and so on.**

Why am I telling you all this? Well, because today I'm giving you the first real space battle between the Halo universe and the Stargate universe! That's right, as I promised, I dedicated myself to writing what I hope will be quite a chapter. I must ask you to forgive me in advance, though. I don't have a problem admitting I'm still an amateur, and as such, I'm still not very good at describing battles, both on the ground and in space, but I did my best to get it right, and I do believe you'll enjoy it.

So, without any more preambles, here's Chapter 13! Enjoy!

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC **_Infinity_**

0724 hrs. October 11, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"Colonel Caldwell, our sensors are still out of whack. Do you have a way to relay your sensor data to us?" Roland asked, not even waiting for Captain Lasky to say so.

"Stand by," Caldwell replied dryly. A few seconds later, he said, _"We've opened a link. Our sensors are all yours."_

"Understood, Colonel. Link established, receiving data now," Roland said. The holotable displayed an image of the Ark, with _Infinity_ and its escorts near the far right 'arm', and the newly arrived enemy fleet on the opposite sideâ€"and closing in fast. The red dots representing the enemy ships became purple. "I've got several profile matches, all Covenant," he continued. The image zoomed in on the fleet, each dot becoming a ship as the AI began classifying them, his face becoming grim as he did. "We've got 1 _CAS_-class assault carrierâ€| 4 _RCS_-class armored cruisersâ€| 6 _CPV_-class heavy destroyersâ€| 12 _SDV_-class heavy corvettesâ€| and over 30 _CRS_-class light cruisers. 60 ships total," he concluded with a fatalistic tone.

Lasky's hear sank at this revelation. Under any other circumstances, _Infinity_ would have been able to take on this entire fleet without even breaking sweat. But with their engines gone and their shields barely functional, they stood no chance of surviving. He thought about ordering the crew to the lifeboats. They would have better luck on the ground than on a ship that could be destroyed any moment now, especially since he already had several bases established in several

regions close to the Ark's core.

"Captain Lasky," Colonel Sheppard said, "what can we expect of these Covenant ships?"

"Let's just say that we've seen fleets smaller than this one obliterate human fleets three or four times their size with relative ease," Lasky replied.

"They have advanced plasma weaponry capable of burning through most of our ship's hulls, and shields which can hold their own against almost everything," Roland added.

"Almost?" Sam asked.

"It takes a large number of nukes just to get past those shields. Our MAC cannons would be more effective, but since they're currently facing opposite of themâ€¦" Roland said.

"Attention, all hands, this is your Captain," Lasky said on the ship wide COM, not willing to let this pointless conversation going on. "We've detected the arrival of a large Covenant fleet roughly 100,000 kilometers away from our current position." He paused to let that statement settle in. "As you know, Infinity is in no shape to face this imminent threat, and I would never ask of you to take a stand against such an overwhelming force in our current status. For that reasonâ€¦" He was about to give the order to abandon ship when he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Colonel Mitchell's.

"Captain, let us lend a hand," he said. "We might be able to even the odds before they even get close to you."

Lasky was taken aback by this proposal. He wanted to object, knowing that three ships the size of a frigate were no match for a fleet of 60 ships. But then he remembered that it had been one of those little ships what left Infinity in its current state. If these people believed they could help, he too had to believe they could, especially after seeing what they were capable of.

Much like Roland, Mitchell didn't even wait for Lasky to say another word. "Odyssey, this is Colonel Mitchell. Colonel Sheppard and I require immediate transportation back to our ship, and Colonel Carter needs to return to hers, over."

Lost for words, Lasky couldn't even produce a sound as the three colonels were snatched away by their transport beam. He could only observe the real-time holographic image of the three frigates moving away from Infinity and towards the Covenant fleet until the link between Daedalus and Infinity was severed.

"We'll keep a channel open for you to keep tabs on us," Mitchell said over the radio. "Wish us luck."

Lasky finally regained control of his mind and lips, took a deep breath, and finished the sentence he'd left incomplete. "For that reason, I want every last one of you to stay close to your nearest evac point and await further instructions." Then, he added for both his crew and the crews of the three smaller ships to hear, "Good luck to us all."

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_Odyssey_**

0028 hrs. August 8, 2013

Cam looked outside the window of his ship's bridge. _Oh, it's good to be back_, he thought. He'd already had some time to meet again with his crew shortly after Halsey had left, but it was quite different to take back command in the middle of a combat situation. It felt so invigorating.

"So, Sheppard," he said, "want to keep sitting on my chair or shall I take it over?"

"It's all yours, Mitchell," Sheppard replied.

"Good, 'cause I need you elsewhere."

"Leading your squadron of 302s?"

"Attaboy. Surely these aliens have fighters or bombers of some kind to defend them at close range and to make some runs at their enemies. I'd like to think our shield will be able to hold, but let's not take any risks."

"Better safe than sorry. Got it."

"I'll get in touch with Roland, see if he can give us some more intel. I'll forward you anything we get."

"Thanks," Sheppard said as he left.

Cam sat on his chair, placed his arms on the armrests, and inhaled the air on the bridge. _Yes, it's definitely good to be home._ He pressed the COM button and announced, "All hands to battle stations. Show's about to start. Nick," he said to his weapons officer, Nick Hampton, "I want Asgard weapons charged and ready to fire. As soon as we're in range, pick a target and open up; don't wait for my order." He linked up a channel with _Daedalus_ and _Hammond_ and said, "Sam, Caldwell, I hope you don't mind if I make the calls for this one. You ready?"

"Cam, I'm not sure if we should be jumping into battle with an alien race we still know nothing about personally without at least trying to contact them," Sam said.

"Are you serious?" Cam asked disbelievingly.

"Hey, we already did it when we first arrived here and it didn't exactly go well."

"Yeah, because we didn't know everything there was to know about this war. Now we do, and now we're helping the good guys. And I find it funny that it is you who's saying this instead of Daniel."

"Actually, he said it first. I'm just voicing his opinion."

"Oh, well," Cam said with a shrug, even if Sam and Daniel couldn't see it.

"Sir," Hampton said, "most of the fleet is holding position fifty kilometers away, but half the smaller ships just starting to advance on us. They're powering weapons!"

Cam stared at the fast-moving vessels. They had to be smaller than the 304s, but they were yet to prove how powerful their plasma weapons were. Suddenly, the viewport's HUD came on and started tagging every ship in the fleet with a special designation, including the assault carrier in the middle of everything and the four armored cruisers on each of its sides.

"Colonel Mitchell," Roland said through the radio, "I've uploaded everything we've got on Covie ships into your tactical battle mainframe. Colonels Carter and Caldwell should have it already, as well."

"Thanks, Roland," Cam replied. "We'll put it to good use."

"They're firing!" Hampton exclaimed as dozens of fiery-red plasma ballsâ€”torpedoes, as the HUD designated them based on Roland's dataâ€”left their ships and streaked across space, heading directly towards the 304s. "Tracking incoming torpedoes. At current speed, they'll impact on us in sixty seconds."

"Hey, Sam?" Cam said. "I don't think these folks are much for talk. You still wanna try and contact them?"

"Not really, no," Sam replied. "Hate to agree with you, but you're right."

"Damn right I am. How about we shoot first, ask questions later? Nick, forget about picking a single target. Have each Asgard battery lock on to a different ship. Sam, Caldwell, I suggest you do the same."

"You want to take down fourâ€”light cruisers at once, sir?" Hampton replied, having taken a moment to read the UNSC designation for the ships.

"Why not? They seem even smaller than a Goa'uld mothership, and we've taken on those with less effort," Cam said. "We'll take the ones in the center; Caldwell, you take the ones on the left; Sam, you take the ones on the right."

"Yes, sir," Hampton said. "Locking on to targets. Time for plasma torpedoes impact, thirty seconds."

"I've got my targets, Mitchell," Caldwell said. "How about you, Sam?"

"Acquired. Ready to fire on your mark, Cam."

"Roger that. Don't wait for me to tell you, just fire at will."

"Twenty second to impact," Hampton said. The torpedoes grew larger on

the viewport, certainly more menacing than any other kind of alien weapon Cam had seen before. "Ten secondsâ€¦ five seconds, and we're in range!"

A new dozen plasma shots joined the ones already traveling through the blackness of the Ark's upper atmosphereâ€"but these ones were of a different type and moved opposite of those. As the countdown for impact reached zero, Cam could only hope his faith in ZPM-powered Asgard shields would not be proven wrong this day.

And it wasn't. As the torpedoes found their respective targets, _Odyssey_'s shields flared fiercely from bow to stern, but they didn't fail. "Shield strength at 93 percent, sir," Hampton announced, unable to contain a smile of gladness.

The same couldn't be said of the enemy ships. When the plasma over the Asgard shield dissipated, Cam spotted twelve different fireballs surrounded with debrisâ€"the remains of twelve Covenant _CRS_-class light cruisers.

"Targets destroyed! The remaining cruisers are turning around!" Hampton said joyfully.

"Let's not get cocky now, people. It's just 12 down, 48 more to go," Cam said. "Plus, these cruisers are just retreating behind their larger counterparts, and I'll bet a month's pay those have bigger guns capable of inflicting more damage."

"Wait, Cam, let me just confirm something," Sam said. _"Roland, you there?"_

"Yes, ma'am."

"I detected a very slight fluctuation on the cruisers' shields just as they fired. Do you have any idea as to what may be causing it?"

"Yes. Since Covenant plasma turrets are located behind their shields, they always have to lower a small section to allow their torpedoes out, or else they would just detonate inside."

"Sam, you thinking what I'm thinking?" That was Caldwell.

"It could be possible, but we'd need to get them to fire again."

"No problem. Mitchell, I'm going to get closer and draw their fire."

"What for?!" Cam yelled.

"If they have to lower even a small section of their shields, we may be able to beam a nuke aboard one of those ships."

"You're talking about 48 ships firing at you the moment you get in range!"

_"We can go in cloaked at full sublight, then de-cloak and raise our shields it once we're in their midst. Hopefully, one or two of the bigger ones will fire first. We beam the nuke, we cloak ourselves

again, and we haul ass."_

"Much as I enjoy your bravery, Caldwell, once you reactivate your cloak, you'll be effectively replacing your shield. What makes you so sure their plasma torpedoes will not keep tracking you?"

"They won't,"_ Roland said. "_Infinity_'s sensors are currently the most advanced you'll find in this galaxy, and even with them I had a hard time locating _Hammond_ when it was cloaked and stationary. Trust me, once _Daedalus_ is cloaked, those torpedoes won't be a problem anymore."_

Cam considered it for a moment. It _was_ a good plan, and if Caldwell was able to pull it off, this Covenant fleet would surely think it twice before advancing any further. Hell, they could even get the brilliant idea of retreating. "Alright, _Daedalus_, go ahead. And give those bastards our regards."

"You bet I will,"_ Caldwell replied, and his ship disappeared.

"Sir," Hampton said, "I'm detecting hundreds of smaller spacecraft moving in to intercept us."

"Fighters," Cam thought out loud. He'd been right to ask Sheppard to get his squadron ready. "Hey, Roland, what can you tell us about those?"

"Covenant Seraphs. Highly maneuverable fighters equipped with heavy plasma cannons, as well as a pulse laser and plasma charges for strafing and bombing runs. They also possess energy shields, but they are only a fraction of the strength of those on capital ships and are easily depleted with sustained fire."_

"Thanks Roland. Sheppard, you hear this?"

"Loud and clear, Mitchell,"_ Sheppard came in on the COM. "_We're good to go. Just give the word."_

"How long before they're on top of us?" Cam asked Hampton.

"Less than thirty seconds, sir."

"Okay, Sheppard, you have a go, but stay behind us to provide cover," Cam ordered.

"You sure of this?"_

"Hundreds of shielded alien fighters against a handful of unshielded F-302s? Now that we know our shields _can_ hold their own against something stronger than fighter fire, I'd rather give them hell with our railguns than send you to what could be your deaths. Just make sure to take down any bogeys we miss."

"Understood. Here we go."_

All of _Odyssey_'s and _Hammond_'s 302s left their respective bays, spun around, and took positions three hundred meters behind both ships, spreading out to cover as much space as possible. Cam heard Sheppard give some final instructions to both squadrons as the gap

between the swarm of Seraphs and the 304s closed quickly.

Three seconds later, Cam felt the slight vibration of 32 railguns firing all at once, turning the blackness outside into a display of plasma fireworks caused by the exploding fighters that looked like an outer space version of the 4th of July. The plasma shots from their weapons impacted on the superior shield harmlessly. Several Seraphs made it past the ship, albeit with their own shields downâ€”only to be met by a fusillade of AIM 120A air-to-air missiles coming from two squadrons of F-302s.

Meanwhile, thousands of kilometers away, a small ship appeared out of nowhere right over the assault carrier. Cam expected to see the sides of every single ship warming up with plasma torpedoes in preparation to fire on this new target. The element of surprise, however, must've left several alien commanders stunned and shocked in some way, because only one _RCS_-class cruiser began charging its turrets.

Caldwell, you lucky son of a bitch, Cam thought. He'd get a chance to do exactly what he'd hoped forâ€”to blow one of the capital ships on this fleet.

The cruiser fired its torpedoes. A split-second later, _Daedalus_ vanished againâ€”

â€”and ten seconds later, a new sun was born above the Ark.

The Mark IX Naquadria-enhanced warhead that _Daedalus_ had been able to beam aboard the Covenant ship disintegrated the cruiser and its occupants before they even had a chance to realize what had just happened, also obliterating no less than other ten light cruisers unlucky enough to be close by. The shockwave made the shields of a few other ships flicker, and some even collapsed violently, causing some damage on the hulls behind them.

"Caldwell, do you read?" Cam asked after yet another minute, still stunned by what he had just seen.

"Yeah, we're still here."

"Nice move there. Ready for another pass?"

"I don't think that will be necessary, Cam," Sam said.

"Look!"

And as he did, he witnessed the formation of four separate vortexes of light right in front of the assault carrier and the remaining armored cruisers. When they faded, the capital ships were nowhere to be seen.

"They're retreating!" Cam exclaimed.

"The larger ones are," Caldwell stated. _"The blast must've damaged any subspace capabilities the smaller ones could have."_

"Then let's finish this so we can all pop the champagne. Nick, target the destroyers andâ€”"

"Oh, no," Sam said.

"What is it, Sam?" Cam asked.

_"Those shipsâ€"they were _not_ retreating. They were bypassing us."_

"What do you mean 'bypassing us'?"

_"They just reappeared fifty kilometers behind us. And they're headed straight for _Infinity_"_

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC **_Infinity_**

0735 hrs. October 11, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"They're retreating!"

"The larger ones are."

Everyone on the bridge had been following closely the progress of the battle, watching the footage from the one functioning camera on the aft section of the ship and listening carefully to the radio chatter between the three frigates. Thus, when Lasky heard these last few words, he knew something was wrong. Even though Jul 'Mdama as leader of the Covenant Remnant usually encouraged his ships to retreat when possible, his Sangheili still held some sense of honor and rarely did soâ€"which is why there had been so few skirmishes in space since _Infinity_ had been officially patrolling the galaxy. At least so far, 'Mdama preferred to avoid a battle altogether.

Then again, whether he was commanding this fleet or not, surely more than one of his Shipmasters would relish the opportunity to lay waste to the most formidable ship humanity had, and not even a trio of super-advanced ships would make them waver in their resolve. Why, then, would they flee?

_"They wouldn't", he thought.

He was right.

"Captain Lasky, the assault carrier and the three armored cruisers have slipped through!" Roland warned. "They're now less than twenty kilometers away and closing in fast!"

He heard another exchange between Colonels Mitchell and Carter, but he didn't pay close attention anymore. They were trapped between the remaining cruisers, destroyers, and corvettes, and the four capital ships now bearing on _Infinity_'s position. If they turned around and raced to stop the carrier and the cruisers, the smaller ships would start firing from behind, and even if their shields held, they would not be able to get back in time. As far as he knew, these people possessed a different kind of subspace drive, and he had still to see evidence of its short distance capabilities, if any.

Infinity would have to defend itself.

"Roland, do we have anything to throw at them?" Lasky asked.

"Plenty, Captain. What we don't have is a way to deliver it. Our weapon control systems are still down, and there's no way to get a single missile or MAC round to hit 'em without it. Plus, our MAC cannons are still facing away from them."

"How about shields?" Palmer asked.

"Minimal. I might be able to divert power from several non-essential systems to aft shields, but against that much firepower, that will only buy us a couple of seconds before it fails."

"Understood," Lasky said in a low voice. It was over. *_Infinity_* would be destroyed today, and the only way to prevent his crew from going down with it was to give his final order. He pressed the button on the holotable that would allow him to be heard in every single deck. "Attention, all hands. We're evacuating the ship. Proceed to your designated escape pods immediately. This is not a drill!" I repeat, this is not a drill."

He turned to see each officer around him with a straight 'that-includes-you' look. Some saluted and left the bridge right away; others hesitated before leaving with a slight nod and a 'good-luck-sir' expression on their faces.

"They're charging weapons!" Roland exclaimed. "Captain, you'd better get to your lifeboat now!"

"Thanks, Roland, but I'm not going anywhere until I know my crew is safely away from here," Lasky said, fully aware that *_Infinity_'s* escape pods would barely have enough time to get clear of the ship when the plasma torpedoes hit the ship. "Sarah, you should go."

"Not in your life," Palmer replied. "You stay, I'll stay."

"As much as I appreciate the gesture, I still need someone to get Roland off this ship, and since Blue Team is already on its way to a lifeboat!"

"Forget it, Captain Lasky," the AI said. "You'll have to erase me first."

Lasky wanted to object, but there was nothing left to be said. These were more than just a Spartan and an AI. They were his friends and comrades, and they would stand by his side, loyal to the end. He just nodded to both of them.

A nearby screen displayed a counter showing the amount of lifeboats remaining to launch while another screen displaying the real-time video image of the Covenant ships firing their weapons went offline!"no doubt Roland's idea. When the counter read zero, he saluted at Palmer and Roland, and they saluted back; then he closed his eyes and waited for the explosion that would send him out in a blaze of glory.

Except that it never arrived.

"What happened? Did they shoot?" he found himself wondering out

loud.

"They did, Captain," was Roland's equally dumbfounded reply.

"Then why didn't we feel the impact of the torpedoes?" Palmer asked.

To answer the same question all three of them had, Roland brought up a hologram of _Infinity_ and the approaching ships on the holotable. Where moments ago there had been a gap in between, there was now a large half-sphere of some sort, something the damaged sensors couldn't really define. Was it some sort of defensive measure from the Ark or something else entirely?

"Uh, Captain?" Roland said, even more perplexed than before. "I think you need to take a look at this."

The screen the AI had previously turned off came on again, providing an image Lasky would never forget. The aft camera was aimed directly at the objectâ€”a massive energy shield, of all things. But he had to rub his eyes and blink several times to understandâ€”no, to _believe_ what he was seeing _behind_ that shield.

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

USS **_Odyssey_**

0037 hrs. August 8, 2013

"We've got to double back! We can't let those ships destroy _Infinity_!" Cam exclaimed.

_"Even at maximum sublight, there's no way we'll get there in time," _Sam replied.

The rest of the fleet was now moving forward again, plasma turrets on every ship charging as they went, intent on keeping the 304s occupied to prevent them from aiding _Infinity_. More Seraphs kept coming, raining hell on _Odyssey_'s shields and taking any chance of switching to cloak without taking considerable damage out of the equation.

"Can't we do the same thing they did?" Cam asked.

"Maybe, but I'd need some time to make calculations first, or we risk crashing into or appearing inside one of those ships when we come out of hyperspace."

"Time is the one thing we don't have now! We've got to try something! Sheppard, you head back first. We'll cover you."

_"Understood," _he replied.

"Alice, give it five seconds, then turn us around," he told his nav officer, Alice Finn. "We're getting there no matter what."

"Aye, sir," she replied.

But just as she was starting to make the maneuver, Sheppard yelled, _"Too late! They've already fired!"_

By the time _Odyssey_ was facing the four capital ships, Cam confirmed in terror what Sheppard had stated. Several white-red torpedoes were now halfway along their path towards _Infinity_. Even from here, it was quite obvious Captain Lasky had given the evac order, as hundreds of small pods being launched from the ship raced away from it. More Covenant fighters were starting to leave their ships to pursue the fleeing craft like a pack of rabid feral dogs chasing after their defenseless prey.

Cam suddenly felt infused with righteous rage and a burning desire for revenge. He might not be able to save the ship or its crew anymore, but he'd make sure these damned aliens would pay for it. "I'm sorry, Captain," he whispered.

"Stand by," Sam said. _"I'm detecting something coming out of hyperspace."_

The plasma volley was just about to reach _Infinity_ when a hyperspace window appeared to its right. Cam was unable to see what came through it at first, as the exit vector took whatever it was directly behind the ship, effectively coming between it and the torpedoes. Plasma splashed and evaporated over this new contact's shields—and a new voice came in on the radio.

_"What the _hell_ was that?!"_

"Sir?" Cam found himself asking. That voice was too peculiar to be someone else's.

"Mitchell, I let you step through the Gate for the first time in years, then I send you some support, and now you're already risking your asses for some people you've barely met?"

Cam couldn't suppress a grin at this. Then, as the plasma dissipated, his smile became even bigger, and he exhaled heavily, only now realizing he had been holding his breath for a while. Even _Odyssey_'s Asgard shields paled in comparison to the one that had unwittingly spared _Infinity_ from being blown to kingdom come—a shield that protected _the_ most majestic piece of Ancient technology ever built.

Atlantis.

"At least tell me I just saved the good guys," General Jack O'Neill said.

"That you did, sir, and not a moment too soon," Sam gleefully replied.

"General, if you don't mind my asking," Cam said, "what are you even doing here? And by 'you' I mean you _and_ Atlantis."

"Hey, nice to see you too!"

"No, it's good to see you. Hell, it's great to see you! But why are you here?"

_ "Sir,"_ Sam broke into the conversation, _ "sorry to interrupt, but I do need to point out we're in the middle of a battle here, and that ship behind you seriously needs some additional support. I assume you're already aware of other four ships closing in on you?"_

_ "Yeah?"_

_ "I'm sure they won't be more than a nuisance for you, but they may still pose a danger for _Infinity_. Could you extend Atlantis' shield to encompass it?"_

_ "_Infinity_? That's the name of that _wreck_"_ O'Neill replied.

_ "Please, sir, just do it!"_ Sam insisted.

_ "Fine, give me a second,"_ O'Neill said in a calmer, lower tone, as if focusing his whole mind on the task at hand. It occurred to Cam that the General could be the one sitting on the Ancient control chair, flying the city-ship pretty much in the same way Sheppard had once. After all, both of them were the two highest ranking individuals in the Chair Interface Aptitude test known to date.

The carrier and the cruisers had stopped advancing the moment Atlantis had come out of hyperspace, as if trying to understand what it was and how to take it down, and only now that the city-ship was taking position next to _Infinity_'s port side and the dome-shaped shield started to expand over it did they start moving again, correcting their course to pass right over the energy barrier. Cam noticed something was happening on the underside of all four ships. They were glowing.

_ "Careful, sir,"_ Sam advised. _ "I'm detecting an energy buildup beneath the ships, similar to the one generated by our Asgard beam weapons but slightly weaker."_

_ "Mitchell, you sure we're siding with the _real_ good guys, right?"_ O'Neill said.

"Positive, sir."

_ "If this goes south later on, you're fired."_

"I'm pretty damn sure we're aiding the right people, General."

_ "Fair enough. Just so you all know, the city is down to its last few hundred drones, so pray they'll do the job."_

Drones, Cam thought. That ought to make for a great show.

_ "Sir, I suggest you take down their fighters first before they can get close to _Infinity_'s escape pods,"_ Sam said.

_ "Right. I knew that,"_ O'Neill replied, much to Cam's "and possibly Sam's" amusement.

The assault carrier was now directly above Atlantis, its glowing bow aligned with the city's central spire. Without warning, it discharged

a massive beam of plasma on the energy domeâ€”but it lasted so far, as a large number of bright yellow lights emerged from three of Atlantis' piers. The drones swirled together, forming a single swarm that got through the Covenant ship's shields like they weren't even there and bisected it in two at the neck with precision and grace, shredding its innards deck by deck until there was nothing left but scrap.

The Ancient projectiles then got separated into three groups, each one heading for the nearest cruiser, while a few dozens more headed directly for the Seraphs which were almost on top of the escape pods. Within seconds, the space around the city became littered with the remains of four Covenant capital ships, its complement of fighters, and thousands of charred corpses who would never know exactly what hit them.

"Hell, yeah!" Cam exclaimed. "That's how it's done!"

"Thank you, sir," Sam said. _"We'll take care of the rest. You just stay there until we're finished."_

"Roger that, Carter."

"All right, people," Cam said with a smile, "let's turn around again and kick some alien behinds, shall we?"

"Understood, Mitchell," Caldwell said, the first words he had spoken in a while. _"I'll warm things up for you a little."_

The view outside changed as _Odyssey_ banked right to face the remaining Covenant ships. The cowardly bastards were already trying to turn tail and run, several vortexes like the ones he'd previously seen starting to form at each ship's bowâ€”

â€”only to have them fade as _Daedalus_ reappeared and fired its beam weapons at each ship's engines, making short work of a few more light cruisers and corvettes in the process.

The Covies were boxed in between the three 304s, and now it was up to Cam and Sam to finish the job.

"Okay, I'm counting 29 ships left. Nick, you can open up on them at any time," Cam said.

"Gladly, sir," Hampton replied.

Both ships fired mercilessly, taking down cruiser after cruiser, destroyer after destroyer, and corvette after corvette, with no more than one shot per enemy ship and virtually no resistance from their part. In a matter of minutes, the largest enemy fleet Cam had ever seen had been reduced to smithereens, and the skies above the Ark became calm once more.

That was, until a new contact appeared on Cam's sensors.

"Sir, I'm detecting another ship fifty-two kilometers behind us and twenty kilometers below usâ€”_SDV_-class heavy corvette," Hampton announced, and he added, "It's leaving the Ark's atmosphere."

Cam knew exactly which ship he was talking about. _Glorified

Wisdom_â€"Halsey's former flagship. "Can we move in to intercept?"

"It's too late, sir," Hampton said. "It's gone."

"Gone as in 'cloaked', or gone as inâ€"?" Cam asked.

"It escaped, Colonel."

Cam lowered his head. Ifâ€"or rather, _when_â€"that ship got back to his compatriots, it would no doubt present a report of this battle, and either the Covenant would send an even larger fleet, or they would learn the lesson and stay away from the Ark. He prayed they would lean towards the latter.

"Hey, guys," O'Neill said, _"the view from here is quite lovely, you know. It's not like I need to land or anything."_

"Of course, sir," Cam replied, smiling at the General's trademark sarcasm. "Let me get in touch with _Infinity_. Maybe Roland can provide you with a good place to land."

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC **_Infinity_**

0740 hrs. October 11, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Lasky had seen many crazy things in his life. Ever since his first personal encounter with the Covenant war machine and his escape from Circinius-IV, he thought there was nothing that could shock him anymore. Then, years later, he'd learned about the Forerunners and their artificial worlds such as the Halos, the Ark, and Requiem. Now _that_ had been quite astonishing.

And yet, he never in his whole life imagined he'd get to see a _freaking flying city_, in space, making such a dramatic apparition to save their asses. Even after seeing the video feed, he couldn't believe it. He'd actually felt so compelled to see it with his own eyes that he'd had to leave the bridge and drive the Warthog that had been used to take the colonels from the hangar to the bridge, all the way to the atriumâ€"a huge space destined for R&R located on the top of the ship with a large transparent metal dome from which he'd be able to get the best view.

While on his way there, something had startled him so much he'd floored the brakes hard enough to make the vehicle skid abruptly to a halt. An energy barrier of some sort was making its way towards him way too fast for him to evade it. It turned out to be harmless, though, as he confirmed when it passed right by himâ€"or rather _through_ himâ€"and continued expanding away from him.

By the time he'd reached the atrium, the crystal clear view of outer space had become opaque. The same barrier he'd seen moments ago was now protecting _Infinity_.

Lasky had climbed up a ladder as fast as he'd been able to, reaching the scaffolding surrounding the place which allowed for a complete

view of the exterior. And when he'd peeked outside, he'd found himself staring at a sizable amount of elegant skyscrapers scattered along six different platforms branching out from the center, giving thisâ€¦ flying city an appearance of a snowflake.

He also saw the assault carrier with its energy projector primed hovering directly above the tallest tower.

He'd feared the plasma beam would be too much for the shield to handle. Much to his surprise, it held without as much as a flicker.

Then came the lightsâ€”hundreds of lights that emerged from three of the city's arms and attacked the carrier. If anything, what he saw only had served to shock him even more. The lights had cut through the carrier's hull, its shield unable to hold them back, and in the blink of an eye they had pulverized it in a way not even Super-MAC round could, not even _Infinity_'s.

It had already been several minutes after that, and he was still glued to the ice-cold metal, his eyes dancing between the marvelous city, its sturdy shield, and the debris field outside.

"Captain Lasky," Roland said over the atrium's speakers, _"the commander ofâ€¦ Atlantisâ€¦ is requesting permission and a set of suitable coordinates to land on the Ark, preferably over water."_

When had he turned his personal comm off? _Never mind._ He turned it back on again, forcing himself to put his astonishment aside, and replied, "Can you relay them the location of the ocean near the Citadel?"

"Right away, Captain."

Moments later, the shield that had protected _Infinity_, not once but twice, shrank again until it reached the city's boundaries, and the whole thing began moving towards the Ark, becoming smaller and smaller with each passing second.

Lasky descended from the scaffolding and jumped back into the Hog. "Roland, can you patch me through to Citadel Base?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Tell them to aim their sensors and cameras to the object entering the atmosphere and to relay us the feed. And have them send search and rescue parties to every escape pod that made it close to them."

"Understood, sir."

Lasky raced back to the bridge. Once there, he could see on one of the screens the live feed from Citadel Baseâ€”an entire complex of structures built around the shield generator towers and the Citadel itself. Roland also thought of translating the images into a holographic representation of the ocean and the inboundâ€¦ ship. Lasky still couldn't decide what to call the thing.

The city had completed its atmospheric entry by now and was getting

close to the ocean's surface. Still surrounded by its shield, it angled itself in such a way it would touch down smoothly. Upon landing, it produced a small wave—and by small, Lasky meant a wave half the size of a tsunami. He was quite impressed to see that the city was perfectly buoyant, all things considered. Its shield was finally lowered, and the light from the Forerunner artificial sun got reflected by windows and metallic surfaces, giving it an even more sublime look.

"Captain Lasky, do you read?" That was Colonel Mitchell's voice.

"Yes, Colonel. Once again, we're in your debt."

"Don't even mention it. Look, now that the battle is over, our commander would like to meet you in person. Is there any chance you could get aboard one of those Pelicans of yours and fly down to Atlantis?"

"Sure thing, Colonel. As soon as we're able to bring some of our officers back aboard."

"Understood. Perhaps then we will all get to listen to what Colonel Carter had to say before all this madness began."

Lasky chuckled. He had completely forgotten that one of the reasons why he had invited all three colonels aboard was because they had claimed to have discovered some key information regarding the Forerunners. "I'm looking forward to it. Lasky out."

* * *

><p>AN: Hey, a Halo/SGA crossover without Atlantis? No way!

>

So, basically, we've got both factions together and ready to forge an alliance. The next few chapters may not be as action-packed as the last ones, but I still believe you'll like them quite a lot.

Also, I'm well aware that I've left a little something pending. Don't worry. Sooner than you think, I'll bring back the Wraith topic, so sit tight and get ready!

If you have any doubts, you can send me a PM or post something on my Facebook page. I truly hope it'll become a nice asset for you all. Until next chapter!

Oh, and don't forget to review on your way out! Cheers!

**EDIT: Thank you all for the support you've given me so far! I'm placing this story on hold for the next month. There's a few things going on right now in my life that need some sorting out before I continue writing this fic. But don't you worry, I'll be back after that. Until then! God bless.
>

****A/N: Merry Christmas, everyone!****

****Yes, I'm back. I actually intended to post this chapter yesterday, but... well, it was Christmas Eve. But here I am today, still trying to digest yesterday's dinner and updating this story. Enjoy Chapter 14!****

*** * ***

><p>Atlantis conference room

****Atlantis, the Ark****

****1131 hrs. August 8, 2013****

For the second time in less than a week, Daniel had just finished reading the IsoDidact's record to a captive audience—except that this time, his audience was comprised of more than just SG-1. Sitting around Woolsey's 12-foot long mahogany table were Woolsey himself at the head; to his right, General O'Neill, Colonels Carter and Mitchell, and Doctor Jackson; and to his left, Sheppard, Major Sullivan, Commander Palmer, and Captain Lasky. Blue Team was standing guard behind the small UNSC party.

Introductions had already been made three hours ago, just before Daniel began sharing his findings. Needless to say, after he'd finished, everyone remained speechless for a while, until General O'Neill finally broke the silence. "So, not cute and furry?"

Both Daniel and Sam smiled apologetically and shook their heads, while the three sitting guests exchanged wondering looks. Sheppard lowered his head and grinned at this. Truth be told, he had always believed the same thing about the Furlings, but to hear the disappointment in the good old General's voice was just priceless.

He could still remember when O'Neill— "talked him" into joining the Atlantis expedition as clearly as he was just recalling the conversation they'd had less than an hour ago when he was beamed down to the Ancient city.

"Sir, what is the Atlantis doing out here?" Sheppard asked. "I thought the IOA was not willing to let the city leave Earth anymore."_

"Oh, you know those IOA," General O'Neill replied. "They love to wait until it's really hit the fan to do something."_

"No, sir. Usually not even then."_

"Right. Well, it helped that someone made a pretty strong case for taking Atlantis back to Pegasus. I just— helped them realize that."_

"Yes, sir," Sheppard said, smiling. Of course, O'Neill was talking about the argument Sheppard had had with the IOA just prior to taking temporary command of the _Odyssey_ and leaving Earth along with the _Daedalus_ to provide support to Colonel Carter and SG-1 in case they found whatever had caused the Wraith to change—for lack of a better

wordâ€”in the Andromeda Galaxy. He had tried to convince them that Atlantis needed to go back to Pegasus, claiming that the millions of humans back there would need to know that they had not been left aloneâ€”that the "Atlanteans" would still be there for them now that the Wraith were back. When he'd walked out of the room, he couldn't shake the feeling that his words had fallen into deaf ears._

Except they hadn't, apparently.

“It's a good thing you showed up when you did, sir, or the outcome of this battle would have been very different,” Sheppard said, also knowing that such a thing would not have been possible without the coordinates Carter had managed to extrapolate from the data collected at the Wraith homeworld just a few days ago.

“Call it a hunch, but I thought you guys would need some additional help,” O'Neill replied. “Plus, I wanted to let you know Atlantis was going back to where it belonged. What better way to do so than to fly it all the way here?”

Once again, Sheppard smiled.

The sound of a wheeled chair being pushed aside brought Sheppard back to the now. Woolsey stood, straightened his suit, and cleared his throat. The IOA had already been informed about the current situation, and General O'Neill had told Sheppard that they had appointed Woolsey as Earth's representative for the talks that should follow, in the hopes that an alliance could be forged with the UNSC. John wondered what it had to feel like to speak on behalf of the people of Earth before people fromâ€”well, Earth.

“While this is not the first time I've representedâ€”our world before the leadership of other human planets,” Woolsey began, “I believe what we've just heard changes everything. It's obvious we have more in common than we first thought, even if it's only because of our pastâ€”or rather, the past of these ancient races. But even if it weren't so, the reality is that we've met, so now it is up to us to find something in common between us.” He paused. “I know our people and yours may have had a rough first contact, but now it's time to put that behind us and start looking forward to our future.

“I believe there is much we can achieve together and share with one another. We can learn a lot from you, just as much as you can learn from us. I hope you may come to see us as friends and allies, and personally, I look forward to the great many things we can accomplish.”

Woolsey stood there for a moment before reaching for his chair and sitting down again. Then, after a short moment of silence, Captain Lasky spoke. “I must admit that, under any other circumstances, I'd be questioning the true intentions behind such a proposal.” He paused before continuing. “However, there is no denying the fact that you did save us from certain death just a while ago. You helped us recover our crew from the Ark's surface after their lifeboats landed and took them back to _Infinity_ using your beaming technology. You've shared with us something you could've kept for yourselves. Even now, you're offering us your friendship and support, and so far, you haven't even asked for anything in return.”

"Don't mention it," Mitchell said. "It's the least we can do after we almost screwed up by siding with Halsey."

"You had no way of knowing," Lasky said. "She's managed to deceive a lot of people, you know."

"Still, I'm just glad she decided to show her true colors when she did," Mitchell said.

"It would've happened sooner or later, anyway," Palmer replied.

At this point, Sheppard caught a glimpse of the Spartans from the corner of his eye. Despite the fact that they remained like statues, he could tell from the slightest body language that this conversation was making at least one of them uneasy. He couldn't help but wonder why.

* * *

><p>Atlantis conference room

Atlantis, the Ark

1836 hrs. October 8, 2558 (Military Calendar)

John was trying with all his being to remain as detached as possible from this conversation, but with so many people talking about Dr. Halsey like this, he was finding it increasingly difficult to do so.

Learning about his mother's actions and defection had been a terrible blow to him and the rest of Blue Team. Fred, Kelly, and Linda had been searching for her for four years, ever since their rescue from Onyx. By the time John had been reunited with them and joined them in their search, they had already tried to contact her through every possible channel. It was as if she had vanished into thin air.

Then, just a few days agoâ€¦|

While he knew what Halsey had done, he still couldn't understand it. And he definitely still couldn't accept it. Thus, he couldn't accept all these comments. He found himself in the middle of a conflict, his heart telling him to break protocol and raise his voice to defend her, and his mind keeping him at bay, locking him into a standing upright position.

"Oh, stop it already," he heard Dr. Jackson say in a whisper, right after Palmer's sentence.

"Daniel, not now," Colonel Mitchell replied in the same tone.

"Yes, now, and if you don't like it, you shouldn't have brought it up," Dr. Jackson insisted.

"Daniel?" General O'Neill broke in.

"Jack?" Dr. Jackson replied.

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes, there is."

"Well," General O'Neill said, obviously not expecting that answer, "I'm sure it can wait until we're done here, right?"

"No," Dr. Jackson answered firmly.

" 'No'?"

"No. I've had enough of thisâ€”of the way everyone talks about Halsey like she were some kind of demon or monster."

Everyone looked to Dr. Jackson in surprise, John himself included. Several moments of awkward silence passed before General O'Neill said, "You know, if we were back home, I'd be looking for a scar in the back of your head or inside your mouth, but obviously there are no Goa'uld in this galaxy, so I must ask. You sure everything's alright up there?"

"Subtle, Jack. Thanks, but I'm fine."

"Fine? From what I understand, that woman took one of our battlecruisers by force and used it to attack another shipâ€”a human shipâ€”, not to mention she took you hostage and even threatened to kill you, yet here you are defending her. Forgive me if I don't take your word for it."

Dr. Jackson jerked his head backwards and huffed. John had seen civilians defying military personnel before, but the way this man talked to a Generalâ€”on a first-name basis and with such familiarityâ€”was like nothing he'd seen before.

"Look, Dr. Jackson," Palmer said. "I've already apologized to you for the way I treated you, but what I said before about Catherine Halsey is true, and I hope you come to understand it. You don't know her like we do."

"Oh, I agree," he replied with an amused tone.

"Daniel, don't," Colonel Mitchell warned in a whisper.

"This branch of your Navy where Halsey used to workâ€”this Office of Naval Intelligence," Dr. Jackson continued, ignoring the Colonel. "From what she told me, they've been doing a lot of things to which the terms 'top secret' and 'highly classified' can be applied. I don't think they'd just share all that stuff with anyone, not even their own Naval officers, but surely they debriefed you on everything she used to do there, right? Otherwise, why would you hate her so much? Unless they only told you what they wanted to make her look bad while they remained cleanâ€”"

"Jackson, you're way out of line now," Mitchell said with his voice raised.

"Oh, we're back to last names again?" Dr. Jackson said angrily, standing up and sending his chair flying back against the wall. "Well, I don't care, because regardless of what you've been told, she is just doing what she's doing because she'd had no other choice. Her own kind abandoned her when she needed them most. Hell, her own kind sent someone to kill her rather than save her!" He slammed a fist

into the table. "She found no other choice but to seek refuge with the enemy, and now they're after her, too. She's alone! How can she trust _anyone_? Especially you people!"

"Daniel, shut up and sit down!" General O'Neill ordered. Dr. Jackson immediately turned to see him with an almost mad look before taking his chair and pushing it against the table. He started to walk away from the conference room, and on his way out, he turned to see John and the other Spartans, pity etched on his face, like he knew about Halsey's relationship with them. The wall behind Mr. Woolsey parted, allowing Dr. Jackson to leave.

"Oh, for crying out loud," the General said and stood to follow him. "Daniel!" he cried out after him. Colonel Mitchell also stood and left the room in a hurry, while everyone else in the room looked at each other with a bemused look.

John took a moment to ponder on the man's words. Unknowingly, Dr. Jackson had just answered the question that had been nagging him all this time.

* * *

><p>Gate room

Atlantis, the Ark

1142 hrs. August 8, 2013

By the time Cam had stepped outside the conference room, Daniel was already walking down one of the corridors of the Gate room, probably heading for the nearest transporter, with General O'Neill trailing behind him. He ran to catch up to both of them. True enough, when he finally did, Daniel and O'Neill were right in front of one of the city's transporters.

"Daniel, what the hell was all that?" O'Neill was asking Daniel. "Am I looking at the biggest case ever of Helsinki syndrome?"

"Stockholm," Daniel replied.

"Whatever."

"Seriously, Jack? You've known me for, what, over 15 years, and you're seriously asking me that?"

"That's the thing, Daniel. I think I already know the answer, but I need to hear you say it out loud. Why are you defending that woman?"

"Because she's not a monster. And it's not Stockholm syndrome at all. I had already sympathized with her situation by the time she took us hostage."

"Why?" O'Neill asked, frowning.

"Because she was sincere. For the most part."

"How can you possibly know that?" Mitchell asked unbelievably.

"I justâ€"I know," Daniel replied. "Jack, you know I have a thing, a sense for people like her, people who may not be doing the nicest things but who wish to do right. Vala? Jonas? Ke'ra?"

"That would be Linea," Mitchell said.

"No, that would have been Linea had it not been for me. Remember, Jack? Remember who convinced Ke'ra to leave her past behind?"

"That was something different," O'Neill said, but his voice didn't sound so convinced.

"No, it isn't," Daniel remarked.

None of them spoke for a while. This was a delicate situation, one Mitchell would've never expected.

"Daniel," O'Neill finally said, "listen to me. You give me solid arguments, I'll back you up on this." This made Cam flinch while the General continued. "But right now, you need to suck it up. Despite the advancements we've made in the last two decades, we still need alliesâ€" "

"And any technology they can give us," Daniel said, rolling his eyes.

"Yes, Daniel," Jack stated, "and especially now. It's already been three years since Destiny made its three-year long jump between galaxies, which means our people there will wake up and contact us anytime soon, and when that time comes, I want to be able to tell them that help will be on its way soon. So far, aside from Langara, we haven't found any other Icarus-like planets, and the Langaran government is still unwilling to help us. Now, you've seen this place? From what Carter has told me, it might be entirely possible to dial Destiny from here without any danger, but she can't say for sure until she's granted access to any information about this installation or to the installation itself."

"And for that, we need to be friends with the people who control this place," Daniel concluded, obviously understanding O'Neill's words. But he wouldn't go down without a fight. He was just that annoyingly stubborn. "What if it had been the Covenant or Halsey herself instead of the UNSC?" he asked.

"Just play along, Daniel," O'Neill said, ignoring the question. "There are lives at stake here."

"At least we're agreeing on something," Daniel said and waved his hand over the door panel. The doors opened and he walked inside. "Don't worry about me," he said with a sad voice, touching the control panel. "I won't bother you anymore." The doors closed, and a humming noise let Cam know Daniel had left. He shook his head and started walking back to the conference room.

* * *

><p>Atlantis conference room

Atlantis, the Ark

1844 hrs. October 8, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"I apologize for what just happened," General O'Neill said as he and Colonel Mitchell sat down.

"There's no need, General," Lasky replied. He tried to push his thoughts aside for a moment and managed to speak again. "Despite our differences, I do believe an alliance between us would be of great benefit for everyone. However, I'm not qualified nor do I have the authority to make such a call. I would love to take this back to my superiors for them to consider, but I'm afraid Infinity won't fly, and until our Engineers are able to fix our outer bulkhead control systems, we can't release a single Frigate, so for the moment, we're not going anywhere."

"That's not quite true," Colonel Mitchell said. "If you need to go back to your Earth, I can take you there. My ship is at your disposal."

"Oh, no," Lasky replied. "There's no way I could ask you to"

"Captain, you're not asking, I'm volunteering," Mitchell said. "Besides, I'm kinda curious about your Earth."

"Me too," General O'Neill said. "In fact, I'd like to tag along, Colonel Mitchell," he added, looking at him with a 'I-haven't-authorized-this-yet' look.

"Of course, sir," Mitchell said, lowering his head.

"Daedalus and Hammond can stay behind to watch over your ship and crew," O'Neill continued. "Anytime you want to leave, anyone you want to take, just let us know."

"Then it is settled," Woolsey concluded, standing up. "Captain Lasky, it's been a pleasure," he said, holding out his hand.

"The pleasure's been mine," Lasky said, standing as well to walk towards the man and shake his hand. Everyone cleared the room without another word.

The two guards outside were waiting for him and his entourage, the same one who had guided them from the landing pad to an elevator if it could be called that. They would guide them back now. He started to follow them in silence, his mind too busy to let him talk. But it wasn't the notion of an alliance what had him so thoughtful.

He would not admit it openly, but Dr. Jackson's words had actually managed to shake him more than he would've liked, bringing back a sense of guilt and regret over what had happened with Dr. Halsey and a very big doubt he'd tried to bury deep. The man had made the right question, one Lasky had not been willing to answer.

How much had ONI disclosed about Halsey?

"What's on your mind, Tom?" Palmer asked, walking up to his side, once they reached the landing pad.

"I can't shake Dr. Jackson's words," Lasky replied. "He's right, you know?"

"We were following orders," Palmer said. "That's our job."

"Is that what we keep telling ourselves to ignore what we know, deep inside of our minds, to be true?"

"Tom," Palmer whispered, "this is not the time to start thinking about what may or may not be true. We need to focus on the matter at hand. These people? They're nothing short of a miracle, one we desperately needed."

"I thought you didn't believe in miracles."

"After what I've been seeing these last few days?" she replied with a smile. "Look, imagine if we had that kind of technology. Transporting troops and supplies from ship to ground and vice versa in a blink of an eye? Vastly superior shields and camo systems that surpass those found on ONI Prowlers? Weaponry that makes Covie plasma tech look like squirt guns?"

"Greatly improved fleets," Lasky said, feeling carried away by the thought. "We could've used that a couple of decades back."

"We can use it now. We're still at war, after all."

And that's what you need to think about right now. That was what Sarah was trying to tell him. _First things first._ "You're right, Sarah," Lasky said. There would be a time to think about Halsey and ONI. "Thank you."

She nodded and fell behind him again. He stepped into the Pelican, took a seat near the back, and closed his eyes.

But despite his best effort, he still couldn't forget

* * *

<p>Janus' lab

****Atlantis, the Ark****

****0918 hrs. August 9, 2013****

What am I supposed to do? Daniel asked to whoever would listen as he sat in front of the lab's main screen, staring blankly at the ceiling. He could understand why Janus chose to work here, besides the obvious reasons. Something about this place was quite soothing.

He heard footsteps behind him. Heavy footsteps. "I'm sorry, Teal'c, I'm not really in a mood to talk," he said, guessing it would be his Jaffa friend. Getting no reply and hearing no other sound, he turned to see if he hadn't imagined it.

He hadn't. Standing in the middle of the room, there was a man in military uniform—a tall, pale man, almost albino white in fact, with piercing blue eyes and short hair, close cropped to a skin head.

The way he looked down on him immediately unnerved him. "Can I help you, sir?" Daniel asked him.

The man took a step forward, edged closer and much to Daniel's surprise, said, "Thank you, Dr. Jackson."

"For what?" he asked, slightly taken aback by these words.

"For defending my mother the way you did."

"Your mother?" Daniel repeated, his voice trailing off as he realized what this man meant. "You're one of the Spartans?"

"Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan John-117, Dr. Jackson," the tall man replied.

"That's a very long name," Daniel said with a small smile.

"Most people say so, Doctor. Call me Chief."

"Why not 'John'?" Daniel asked. The Spartan's face became grim at this suggestion, and he figured there had to be a good reason. "Alright, 'Chief'. And you're welcome."

The Chief nodded, but he didn't leave. Obviously, he was here for some other reason. "Can I ask you something, Dr. Jackson?" he asked after a while.

"Sure, fire away."

The Chief took a deep breath. "What exactly did I see when I walked into _Hammond_'s Core Room?"

"That was you?" Daniel said, recalling the moment when Halsey escaped from the ship.

"Yes, Doctor."

"Well, I don't know exactly what you saw," Daniel said, wondering if he'd missed something important back then.

"A woman. Floating to Halsey's side just before they disappeared."

"Oh, that. I think that was a Replicator."

"A Replicator?"

"Yes. It's an alien artificial intelligence, a construct resembling a human being, but which in reality is composed of millions of nanite cells. Replicators are easily adaptable and capable of assimilating certain raw materials to build more of themselves, hence the name we've given them."

"But her appearance?" the Chief said.

"What about it?"

"She looked like..." The Spartan seemed lost for words, as if what he'd seen was too impossible to even consider.

"I'm sorry," Daniel said. "I just know what Carter and McKay told meâ€"that Halsey forced McKay to build a Replicator from scratch using the Asgard Core. He never learned why."

The Chief remained silent for several minutes; then, he said, "These Replicators. They have a consciousness of their own when they're created?"

"Actually, they do. In fact, McKay was wondering what good a mindless Replicator would do to Halâ€" Suddenly, a thought appeared at the back of Daniel's mind. "You know something we don't, don't you? Why are you so interested in her appearance?"

"Because sheâ€"itâ€"looked like someone I once knew," the Spartan replied, again taking a deep breath before continuing. "Her name was Cortana."

"What happened to her?" Daniel asked, somewhat curious.

"Sheâ€" she died. Trying to save me."

"A fellow Spartan?"

The Chief shook his head. "Cortana was an AI. My AI," he said. "Dr. Halsey created her, and she gave her to me shortly before the war ended. She was my companion ever since, helped me through many of my missions, stood by me until the end."

Now Daniel was lost for words. _An AI?_ "You said she died," he said.

The Chief nodded. "There are two types of AIs: 'Dumb' and 'Smart'. While 'Smart' AIs are more advanced than 'Dumb' AIs, they deteriorate and shut themselves after seven years. 'Dumb' AIs don't have that problem." He paused. "Cortana was a Third Generation Smart AI."

"She reached the limit of her lifespan," Daniel concluded.

"She outlived her lifespan," the Spartan replied. "That made her unstable, but still, she fought to her last breath."

Daniel looked down and said nothing for a couple of seconds. He thought back to his ordeal with Halsey, trying to remember anything that could give him a clue, an answer for this man. "What can I say, Chief?" he finally said. "Maybe Halsey decided to make a Replicator that would resemble Cortana."

"She saw me. She recognized me. How could such a thing be possible if that were only a mindless Replicator?"

"You think Halsey uploaded a copy of Cortana into that body?"

The Chief shook his head. "That would've been impossible. Sheâ€" she was completely destroyed. There were no copies of her." He paused again. "She was unique," he added with a sad voice.

"I'm sorry, Chief," Daniel said. "I wish I could give you an answer, but I don't know."

"It's okay, Dr. Jackson. You've told me more than I hoped to learn," the Chief said. He turned to leave, then he said, "Thank you again for defending Dr. Halsey. It means a lot to me and to my brothers and sisters."

Daniel nodded, and the Spartan left without another word, walking through the Ancient wall. Daniel turned and stared again at the ceiling. He'd learned something about this visit, something that renewed his faith in Catherine Halsey. _Their motherâ€|_

"You're right about Halsey," someone said behind him. "You know that, don't you?"

"I do," he replied. And then he recognized the voice.

He turned back, but this time, there was no one there. Daniel stood, his eyes dancing all over the room. That woman's voice had come out of nowhere.

"Danielâ€|"

No. That voice _had_ come from this room. He turned again, and his eyes met a face he hadn't expected to see ever again, especially since he saw her for the last time eight years agoâ€| the last time he died. "Youâ€|"

"Hello, Daniel," she said, smiling.

* * *

><p>AN: Sorry if this chapter was a little fast-paced. Like I said, I intended to update last night, but I just started writing it on Monday. I do hope you enjoyed it, despite it being a shorter-than-usual chapter.**

Don't you worry. My month-long 'vacation' is over, and I'll be updating regularly againâ€"if possible, on a weekly basis. Next chapter will include a somewhat interesting side to it, and of course, I will reveal the name of Daniel's visitor, but until then, can you guess who she might be?

Just as a reminder, I opened a Facebook page under the name 'The Fifth Race's Reclaimers'. Its purpose is not to build up likes just to make me feel good, but to use it as a hub where I can share some 'intel' with you, such as images, scale charts, etc. You can find the link on my FanFiction profile page.

Hopefully, my next update will be just before the countdown to 2014. See you soon! And Merry Christmas to you all!

15. Chapter 15: Negotiations

A/N: Happy New Year, everyone! Here's Chapter 15; enjoy!

Disclaimer: I included a small excerpt from Greg Bear's _Halo: Silentium_ in this chapter. You'll know it when you see it.

* * *

><p>Janus' lab

****Atlantis, the Ark****

****0926 hrs. August 9, 2013****

"Youâ€|" Daniel repeated, his mind blocked and unable to say anything else, not even her name. She simply smiled.

"It's been a while," she said. "How've you been?"

Daniel frowned. "Youâ€| really don't know?"

"How could I? I was away for a long time."

"Where?" he asked. "Why?"

"You tell me. You saw it all happen."

"You stopped Anubis. That's the only thing I remember. What I never understood was, how?"

"By engaging him in an eternal battle. I knew I couldn't destroy him, but neither could he destroy me, and as long as I kept fighting him, he would be unable to do anything else."

"Butâ€| you're here," he said. "So either you managed to destroy himâ€|" he paused and considered the possibility. "â€|or you're someone else pretending to be her."

She walked towards him until her face was just a few inches from his. Daniel looked into her eyesâ€| and he knew. It was her.

"I had help," she said. "From the same person who helped you retake your human form after I left."

It took Daniel a moment to recall what had happened that day. "One of your followers," he thought out loud.

"Something like that. He used to be a mighty warrior among his kind before ascending. We were close, and though he couldn't stand watching me suffer, I told him to stick to the rules so that he wouldn't be punished as well. Then, things changed." She stepped back and took a deep breathâ€|or at least so it appeared. Ascended beings didn't really need oxygen to live. "Not long ago, he learned something of great importance. He thought he'd need me to figure it out, so he stepped in and helped me destroy Anubis for good. We were both banished for that."

Daniel shook his head. Ascended rules, he thought. "Then why are you here? And why are the Others allowing it to happen?"

"They don't really care about us anymore. As long as we stay away from the Milky Way or Pegasus."

"So, now, you're here. Are you helping people ascend in this galaxy?"

"Not yet. But you know me. You know I can't help myself. Which is

also why I came here to encourage you."

"Encourage me?" Daniel asked.

She put an ethereal hand on his shoulder. "You're right about Halsey. Most people just don't want to accept it, including her. But she knows. And you've helped her listen to her conscience again. She's trying to amend. She needs a friend now more than ever, someone who's willing to speak for her, to defend her. Just like you've done so far."

"It hasn't done much good."

"Oh, but it has. Your words helped renew the faith of those Spartans in her mother. And others have begun wondering about her, about her actions and true intentions, and about those under whose authority she used to be. You need to keep helping her, being her voice among these people. Trust me, she's well worth it. And you will all need her help very soon."

Daniel looked at her again. "What about my people? Am I supposed to ignore what Jack told me and risk losing what may be our only chance at rescuing our people on the other side of the universe?"

"That won't happen," she said. "You will know when to raise your voice to speak on her behalf."

"So, what am I supposed to do?" he said.

"You asked the same question a while ago. I've just given you the answer."

"Is that all I get? Can't you just tell me exactly what to do?"

"Follow your heart. That has always taken you in the right direction."

Daniel lowered his head and sighed and realized something. "You said we would need her help. Why?" He raised his eyes and saw the worried expression in her face.

"You're in danger," she announced. "All of you. Something's coming, something far worse than anything you've faced so far. You must be ready for it. And you'll need all the help you can get."

"'Something'? What do you mean?" Daniel asked.

She just looked into his eyes and said, "Take care, Daniel." She took back her bright, incorporeal form, and disappeared, leaving a confused Daniel Jackson alone in the room.

* * *

><p>HIGHCOM Facility Bravo-6

Sydney, Australia

1100 hrs. October 14, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Lasky walked down the corridor that led to Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood's office with a purpose, his orders to pick him up and accompany him to the landing pad where their Pelican was waiting to take them back to the _Odyssey_.

It had been three days since he'd left the Ark to come here, and two since he'd delivered his reportâ€”a very thorough oneâ€”to HIGHCOM. He could imagine the looks of surprise on many a captain's face when an unknown ship roughly the size of a frigate suddenly appeared above Earth two days ago, just to vanish right in front of them. Actually, it had been Lasky himself who had suggested that approach, just in case, to avoid getting shot by any Orbital Defense Platforms. After all, even cloaked, Lasky would be able to leave the ship by means of his Pelican, which no-one would be willing to shoot down once he identified himself. From that moment on, most people would surely think this ship was some secret ONI project. Needless to say, his plan worked all too well, even if the ship had had to remain cloaked up to this very moment.

He still couldn't believe the trip back had taken just a little over 24 hours. Then again, Roland had said these people used a different means of faster-than-light travel, which was proven once the _Odyssey_ jumped into 'hyperspace'â€”as Colonel Carter called itâ€”and a blue-white tunnel seemingly without end replaced the stars outside of the bridge. Now _that_ had been an amazing sight, and quite different from the blackness of Slipspace he'd grown used to. One more thing to add to the UNSC's wish list for these people.

Two armed ODSs stood at each side of the entrance to Lord Hood's office. They must've been told he was coming, 'cause as soon as they saw him, one of them opened the door to let him in. Lasky nodded and walked inside the rather humbly decorated office. He saluted the old Admiral.

"Ah, Captain Lasky," Lord Hood said, standing up to return the salute. "Thank you for coming. I assume you've been debriefed on my new assignment."

"I've been told you were chosen as Ambassador to our new friends, sir," Lasky replied.

"Just so. Is our transport ready yet?"

"It is, sir."

"What are we waiting for, then?" the Admiral said, unable to contain a huge smile on his face. He picked up his cap from his desk and walked towards the door. Both of them left the room escorted by the ODSs and headed for the nearest lift. Lasky was aware that his report had immediately fallen under "CLASSIFIED", which meant only a few people in the UNSC would know about the _Odyssey_ and the events that had transpired in the last week; not knowing if these Troopers had clearance to that information, he decided to keep his questions for himself and remain silent until they reached the surface and were aboard the Pelican.

Much to his surprise, Sully was already waiting for them inside the craft, along with the three members of Blue Team who had come back with them from the Ark. He hadn't really expected to see Palmer here;

from what he'd been told, she'd been offered a new prosthetic arm that would fit her particular needs as a Spartan, so she would have to remain on Earth to receive it. However, he'd been kept in the dark about his other friend, and while he knew Osman would surely want him to tell her everything in person, he ignored whether or not he'd be coming back with him and Lord Hood. Until now. _One less question to ask_, Lasky thought.

Sully smiled at them and saluted, to which Lord Hood replied with another salute and a handshake. Lasky just nodded at him. There was something about knowing his old friend was now an ONI agent that unnerved him. Once aboard, and as soon as the soldiers left them alone and the rear hatch closed, though, he decided to ignore his feeling and focus on the matter at hand once more. "All due respect, sir," he said, addressing the Admiral, "I don't remember ever seeing you this glad before."

"I have every reason to be, son," Lord Hood replied. "Not every day you meet people from another galaxy who possess technology surpassing everything we've seen and dreamt of, and who are so willing to share it with us. I can't wait to meet them."

"I'm certain they feel the same way about you, sir," Lasky said. He felt the aircraft shuddering for a moment as the engines roared to life and the vehicle started to leave the ground. He waited for a moment before raising the other question he'd wanted to ask. "So, what have we been authorized to share with them?"

"Well," Lord Hood replied, chuckling, "the way I see it, there isn't really much _we_ can offer _them_, is there? But still, I've been told to offer them something that may be of equal value to them once they've told us exactly what they'll be giving us. Whether it turns out to be something they can use for military purposes or not remains to be seen."

Lasky nodded. It was quite a polite way to say 'you're not authorized to know yet'.

The radio inside the passenger bay crackled. _"Lord Hood, sir, we're about to reach our pre-established rendezvous coordinates. I'll send confirmation to the _Odyssey_ so they can deactivate their cloak and let us in."_

"Roger that. Thank you," Lord Hood replied. Not one minute later, when the engines died and the hatch opened again, Lasky looked outside to see General O'Neill, dressed in uniform, standing outside. He remembered when he walked down the ramp of this very Pelican and into the hangar bay of this ship for the first time, when Colonel Sheppard was wearing his fatigues and he was still unsure whether to trust him and 'his people'. How much things had changed in such a short time!

Just like then, the Spartans were the first ones to walk down the Pelican's ramp, although this time they took positions to its side rather than at the front. Then, Lasky and Sullivan rose from their seats and followed, and finally, Lord Hood stepped outside. "General, thank you for letting us on board," Lasky said. "May I introduce to you Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood?" he added, beckoning Lord Hood closer.

"Admiral! Pleased to meet you," O'Neill said quite effusively. It was obvious that this was an occasion to remember for both parties. "General Jack O'Neill, at your service. Welcome aboard the _Odyssey_."

"Thanks, and the pleasure's mine, General," Lord Hood replied, and both men shook hands. "I've got to tell you, General, I've heard some pretty amazing things about this ship of yours."

"I'm sure you have, Admiral. How about I give you the full tour while we get going?"

"I don't see why not," Lord Hood said. Both men started to walk towards the door leading away from the bay, with Sully and Blue Team following closely, while Lasky decided to stay a few meters behind. He heard a hissing noise behind him and turned to see the bay's outer bulkhead closing slowly. He had been told that the shields had to be lowered before jumping into hyperspace—which in turn meant that any areas exposed to space just like this one would have to be sealed before that to avoid depressurization, so this was a sign that the ship was just about to begin its journey back.

Suddenly, Lasky felt something strange, something he couldn't quite understand—the same feeling he'd felt before all of this began. Like a voice warning him of an impending danger, of a menace that could very well threaten everything.

And somehow, he was certain it was something worse than 'Mdama or Halsey. Much worse.

* * *

><p>CAS****-class carrier ****_Seeker Of Purity_**

In orbit above Hesduros

"Shipmaster, we've lost shields!"

"We have a hull breach on the aft section!"

"They're boarding us!"

For a battle-seasoned warrior like Kaidon Panom, fear should not be something that could easily overcome him. This time, however, as he listened to every Sangheili officer around him, he couldn't ignore it. He tried to find solace in believing that no one, Sangheili or otherwise, would've been able to face such an enemy without being utterly terrified.

Less than five minutes. That was how long it had taken this new foe to defeat the fleet defending Hesduros. They had appeared out of nowhere—a small number of ships unlike anything he'd ever seen. They were all triangular in shape, from the smallest fighter to the largest battleship, and even their boarding craft which was now landing inside every vessel under Panom's command; their hulls were purple, not unlike Covenant ships, but their design was more organic. Their weaponry was not plasma-based, at least not from what sensors could tell, but it had been able to cripple the shields of every Covenant cruiser above the planet in mere seconds. Their shields had

withstood the force of hundreds of plasma torpedoes effortlessly.

And now, they were capturing his own fleet.

Hesduros had become the hub of most of the technological research and development for the Covenant Remnant almost five years ago, shortly after Jul 'Mdama first stepped through a Forerunner holy gate found at Panom keep and began recruiting forces to journey to Requiem. Thus, its location was one of the most well-kept secrets of the Remnant, and even then, the Didact's Hand had been cautious enough to leave a sizable fleet here to protect his safe haven, tasking Panom with the defense of this world should anyone ever attack it. Most of the ships in the fleet, including a carrier and four battlecruisers, had been reassigned to pursue a group of heretics a few days ago, but the remaining vessels here were still enough to hold their own against any human fleet.

But this was no human fleet.

Several distressful reports from troops throughout the _Seeker Of Purity_ started to echo all over the ship's command center, but Panom paid no attention to them, instead fixing his eyes on the hologram before him displaying the enemy fleet now descending on the planet's surface. He closed his eyes and silently prayed to the Didact for forgiveness.

He had failed in his task.

A series of thuds in the door behind him let him know that the invaders had reached the command center. Panom knew that it wouldn't take them long to breach it, but he wasn't willing to stand down. "Warriors of the Didact! Prepare to fight them off! If we're to die here, we will die and join our ancestors with honor!" he barked.

The roar of over a dozen Sangheili muffled the sound of the door being torn apart. Panom drew his energy sword and charged against the incoming wave of attackersâ€"but just as he was about to push the blade through his first victim, it vanishedâ€| and reappeared, along with several more, all around him, like shadows, screeching in such a way that it made him shiver in a way he thought impossible. But they didn't attack him; they just floated around him and his crew, surrounding them from all sides, like caretakers of a herd of _colos_â€"looking after them until they were ready to be taken to slaughter.

Then, his nostrils picked up a scent. A foul scent.

He suddenly realized two things. One, this enemy had no tangible form, which meant it couldn't be killed, but neither could it kill him; and two, he couldn't trust his eyes nor his ears. He would have to rely on what he could smell. And right now, the scent he was smelling was getting stronger. It was behind him. He turned once moreâ€| and this time, his sword sliced through flesh.

Instantly, the shadows winked out of existence, as if the death of their master affected them as well. Free from any distractions and willing again to trust in the rest of his senses, his gaze, along with that of the other Sangheili near him, met the face of their enemyâ€| and his shock became greater. For he had seen this creature

before.

This was a human. It could only be a human. Except that it looked different. It was paler, almost like a ghost, and his eyes like those of a predator, scanning his face fiercelyâ€| hungrily.

Panom had heard more than enough stories about the human demons, the so-called Spartans. 'Mdama himself had once told him about his capture by one of them. That one had actually removed its helmet, allowing 'Mdama to see its face, painfully pale, like a corpse brought back from the dead. Panom thought at first that this could be one of them, but he quickly discarded the idea, as this creature, dressed only in a black garment, was wearing no armor at all.

A reflection on its eyes, clear and plain as day, caught Panom's attention. Something was crawling on the ceiling. Several creatures were crawling on the ceiling, in fact. He raised his sword again, intent on fighting whatever these things wereâ€"

â€"but it was too late.

The creatures had already leapt onto him and his people with a vengeanceâ€"too many for him to fight. He managed to strike a few of them down, but for each one he killed, a dozen more came against him, beating him again and again with their handsâ€"or rather, with the tentacle-like appendixes protruding from them. Before he knew it, they had managed to disarm him and hold him on the floor.

He was badly injured; he felt several broken bones and open wounds, his life blood escaping from his body through them. The only thing he could move was his head, and he almost wished he couldn't, for when he did, the only thing he could see was a horde of these foul beings. His heart sank deeper into his chest when he saw that several of them were actually Sangheiliâ€"horrendously reshaped Sangheili, barely recognizable. Monsters.

He saw two of the creatures stripping a less injured Minor and dragging him to the very same spot where he had killed the 'human', while other two lifted said corpse from the floorâ€"which, much to Panom's surprise, was still moving. It was still alive.

The image he saw next would engrave itself into Panom's mind until the day of his deathâ€"which he now hoped would come soon.

The corpse raised his arm and opened his hand, revealing a cut in its palm, like a ghastly wound. Then, he aggressively placed said hand on the Minor's chest, who writhed and screamed in pain. Slowly, the large opening Panom's blade had left on the pale human's side began closing itself until it was completely healed. The Minor, on the other hand, started to become skinnier and creased; he looked weaker with each passing second, until finally, the Sangheili became the corpse and the pale human regained his strength.

Both the pale human and the two beasts holding the once young Sangheili let go of him, and he fell to the floor, dead. Then, the human walked towards Panom, who felt his own battered armor being taken away from him. The human knelt by Panom's side, raised his hand stained in Sangheili blood, and embedded it against his chest.

He felt a stinging pain at first, but he was already weak and unable

to scream like the Minor had. He knew the same fate as his awaited him, and he embraced it, as long as these awful images died along with him. His eyes became clouded, everything around him started to fade away, and the old Kaidon awaited his final breath.

But when it came, he felt something happening within him. He started to change. He started to move. How could he be moving without breathing? He tried to reopen his eyes, but he couldn't. It was as if something else was controlling his movements.

He was a prisoner inside his own body.

Then he heard the voice, speaking inside his head.

"You have been deceived, young one. But now you will learn the truth.

>For there is only one truth. That which was done will be done again. For we cannot cease from creating, but the end of all our creation will be to look into a reflection and see *ourselves* for the first time.

>"The pain we have brought on ourselves.
"The pain those you worship caused us.

>"For we are the same. All remember the defiance and destruction.
"We announced long ago to those you now call Forerunners that they were not the ones chosen to receive the Mantle, the blessing of rule and protection of life and change that thinks. That blessing was to be given to others.

>"To those you now call humans.
"The Forerunners, just like you, could not accept our judgment, could not bear up under their inferiority, so they reached out and did what we never expected from those we gave design and life and the change that is thought.

>"They drove us from our galaxy, our field of labor. They chased us across the middle distance to another home, and destroyed *that* home, did all that they could to destroy every one of us.

>"A few were spared. Some adopted new strategies for survival; they went dormant. Others became dust that could regenerate our past forms; time rendered this dust defective. It brought only disease and misery; but that was good, we saw the misery and found it good.
"Our urge to create is immutable; we must create. But the beings we create shall never again reach out in strength against us.

>"All that is created will *suffer*.

>"All will be born in suffering, endless grayness shall be their lot.
"All creation will tailor to failure and pain, that never again shall the offspring of the eternal Fount rise up against their creators.

>"Listen to the silence. Over ten million years of deep silence. And now, whimpers and cries; not of birth.
"That is what we bring: a great crushing weight to press down youth and hope.

>"No more *will*.

>"No more freedom.
"Nothing new but agonizing death and never good shall come of it.

>"*We* are the last of those who gave you all breath and form, millions of years ago.

>"*We* are the last of those the Forerunners defied and ruthlessly destroyed.

>"*We* are the last Precursors.

>"*And now, once more, we are* legion."

In that moment, Panom knew that his torment and suffering would not end here with his deathâ€”for he was absolutely certain that he was dead.

In fact, it had only just begun.

* * *

><p>Atlantis, the Ark

1200 hrs. August 12, 2013

Sam couldn't remember being this nervous before, not even when she blew up a sun to destroy Apophis' fleet, or when she and her dad recalibrated the superweapon at Dakara in the nick of time to destroy the Replicators, or when she took part in the final battle against the Asurans. Then again, those had been battles against sworn enemies of the human race. This was just going to be a peaceful meeting with a representative from what had to be the largest group of humans she had metâ€”humans from an alternate version of Earth in the same universe as her own Earth, albeit in another galaxy and 500 years ahead of her own timeline.

For the first time, she was utterly baffled, even when Daniel had already discovered the reason behind this peculiarity.

She knew she had to calm down, even when the greatest alliance Stargate Command would ever forge would, in part, depend on herâ€”especially because of thatâ€”, so as she stood in front of the Stargate with Woolsey by her side and waited for the Odyssey to beam down their guests, she tried to ignore her nervousness by going over what she had learned in the last few days about the UEG and the UNSC.

While Cam and Jack were away, Commander Bradley (Infinity's XO), per Captain Lasky's request, had been kind enough to let Sam and Rodney on board and allow them to examine most of the tech the ship boasted and assess any potential upgrades the SGC party could offer later on. Needless to say, Infinity quickly became Sam's favorite amusement park, so to speak. Despite the damage it had sustained during Halsey's attack, it was still quite amazing, a feat of human achievement, and in no small part a result of humanity's own progress without outside influence, unlike the F-302, the X-303, all BC-304s, and the plethora of stuff developed so far by the SGC based on alien tech.

Of course, there was a lot that could be done for the huge warship, but for the most part, it was already quite advanced. Both Sam and Rodney were glad to see that they would not have to offer any weapons upgradesâ€”something the SGC was not willing to do, anyway.

Any one of the UNSC's Archer, Rapier, or Howler missiles was even more powerful than a Mark VIII warhead such as the ones found in Daedalus-class shipsâ€”which had been able to blow up Hive ships with ease, provided they weren't intercepted along the way by Dartsâ€”, and this ship alone had more missiles in spades than she cared to count. Infinity's MAC guns, both the largest and the smallest ones, were really impressive and without equal, and the progress done in retro-engineering Covenant energy projectors had

resulted in a weapon close enough to the Asgard plasma beam weapons, even when the difference in size was notorious.

Shielding, on the other hand, was a serious problem. While at least _Infinity_ could provide a power output equaling that of a Naquadah reactor, its shields were worryingly weak for Sam's standards. Sure, they could be able to hold their own against Covenant shipsâ€"from which UNSC shielding technology had been retro-engineered as well, and which in turn had adapted them from Forerunner techâ€", but against weaponry as versatile as Asgard beam weapons or Ancient dronesâ€|. Well, one only had to look at _Infinity_'s engines right nowâ€"or rather, its lack of engines. What was worse, most ships in the UNSC, because of their relative size, didn't have the power output required to sustain shields for long. Hence, offering the UNSC both better power-generating capabilities and improved shields was on top of the list.

While Sam and Rodney believed that installing transportation rings on UNSC ships and groundside installations would prove useful, they couldn't decide yet whether to provide them with Asgard beaming technology. The only reason why the Asgard had been willing to install it on the _Prometheus_ and on _Daedalus_-class ships in the first place was because they had been able to place safeguards to prevent its usage as a weapons delivery system, even if they removed said safeguards later on when the circumstances called for it. Sam was not so sure if this would work in this case; given enough time, the Huragok would most certainly find a way to disable said measures. Besides, these people were already used to their Pelicans and other means of transportationâ€"especially ODSs, who she believed would not part so easily with their lifelong tradition of "dropping feet first into hell" by means of their HEVs.

Traveling through Slipspace was simply way too slow, but in a combat situation it actually proved useful, as demonstrated by the Covenant on several occasions when they performed short jumps to ambush UNSC ships during the war. Thus, one more thing Sam was certain the UNSC would love was slightly modified hyperdrive technologyâ€"courtesy of Rodney McKay and his sudden realization about Slipspace while on _Infinity_. He theorized that _Destiny_'s faster-than-light drives were actually highly advanced Slipspace drives, and if he managed to develop a hybrid drive capable of accessing both hyperspace and Slipspace at will with the help of UNSC scientistsâ€"and learn more about Slipspace drives in the processâ€", he would be able to help modify and update _Destiny_'s drives. In theory, at least.

In a nutshell, the UNSC would be given mostly non-military Naquadah-based technology. Of course, in order to mass-produce it, they would have to find and exploit large Naquadah deposits in this galaxy. Sam was grateful to have had Roland's assistance during her visit to _Infinity_, not only for all the aid he provided when she didn't quite understand how some UNSC stuff worked, but for helping her figure out through the UEG's historical records that no Naquadah had been found in any single human colony world to date. Their expansion throughout the stars, however, had barely begun, as they had only colonized worlds within the Orion Arm of 'this' Milky Way, which meant that thousands of worlds remained to be explored in which there could be Naquadah.

Needless to say, it would be beneficial for both the UNSC and the SGC to explore those worlds.

Sam had forwarded all this information to General O'Neill three hours ago while they were still en route to the Ark so that he would know exactly what they would be giving away. She would leave it up to him and Woolsey to decide if and what to ask in return.

A bright flash of light and the familiar hum of an Asgard transport beam alerted her of the arrival of their guests, so she snapped back to attention. When it cleared, Jack and Cam were standing before her, along with Captain Lasky, Major Sullivan, and an older man in Navy uniform. She saluted and said, "Welcome back, General O'Neill, Colonel Mitchell."

"Thank you, Carter. It's good to be back." Sam smiled. She was used to his calling her so informally by her last name. Oddly enough, the way Jack usually didn't care about protocol and chain of command was one of the many things she admired—and liked—of him, even when it usually got him into trouble.

The Navy officer stepped forward, and Jack introduced him as Admiral Terrence Hood. "These are Mr. Richard Woolsey, our civilian delegate, and Colonel Dr. Samantha Carter, one of our foremost experts in alien tech," Jack said.

"Pleased to meet you, Admiral," Woolsey said, shaking the man's hand. "Welcome to Atlantis."

"Thank you, Mr. Woolsey," Admiral Hood replied. "I'm honored to be here."

While the two men greeted each other, Jack surveyed the room. "Where's McKay?" he asked.

"He's setting everything up in the conference room, sir," Sam said.

"Ok. And Daniel?"

Sam shook her head. She'd paid Daniel a visit earlier that day to try and talk him into joining the meeting, but despite her best efforts, he'd refused. He'd said that things would work for the best if he wasn't there, and that he didn't want to have anything to do with the people in that room for the time being, anyway. She wouldn't say all that out loud, though, and hoped that Jack would get the message.

"Alright," Jack said. "At least tell me you have someone who can fill in for him."

"Er—| not exactly," Sam said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sam made a you'll-know-when-you-see-it face and gestured him to follow her to the conference room while the other men finished introducing themselves. As they both approached the room and the doors parted, the sound of a heated discussion was heard by virtually everyone near Stargate Operations.

"No, no, no, I'm telling you, that's impossible!"

"It's not! How many times do I have to dumb it down for you?"

"Dumb it down?! What, you think I'm a toddler?"

"For the sake of intergalactic relations, I'm not going to answer to that."

"I'm the smartest mind in three galaxies! You don't need to dumb anything down for me, you cheap imitation of MCP!"

"Ok, Doc. First, I take no offense in what you just saidâ€"which I'll suppose is just a reference to some mediocre sci-fi movie from your Earthâ€", and second, you can't possibly hope to be any smarter than a third-gen Smart AI!"

Sam stifled a laugh. As it were, Rodney was trying to show off with Rolandâ€"still residing inside Infinity's data banks, but able to manifest himself here thanks to a portable wirelessly-linked holo-projector Dr. Glassman had provided herâ€", apparently without success. She had to agree with the AI's point and give some credit to the humans from this galaxy for such a feat. Despite all her previous experiences with artificial intelligences, she felt good around Roland. He wasâ€| probably even more human than some people she knew. Her Replicator version had been the same, too, but Sam could number the differences between both AIs without effort. She wondered ifâ€"or rather, whenâ€"her Earth would develop anything remotely similar to these AIs.

"McKay!" Jack exclaimed. "What's going on here?"

Both Rodney and Roland turned to see who was speakingâ€"and the AI immediately saluted. Sam found it slightly odd at first that he would do such a thing in the presence of a foreign military officer like Jack, until she realized that he was actually doing this for Admiral Hood and Captain Lasky, who were now standing behind Jack.

Rodney, on the other hand, tried to reply, only to refrain himself when he saw the other guests. His reddish cheeks suddenly became white. He had been briefed about them, so he had to know that one of them was an Admiralâ€"_the_ Admiralâ€"in the UNSC. He must've felt quite embarrassed, but still he whispered to Roland's 'ear', "We're not done here yet, youâ€"."

Roland had his right hand still raised, waiting for the Admiral's response, but Sam could've sworn he'd made a split-second long obscene gesture at Rodney. The AI definitely had a smirk on his face.

"As you were, Roland," Admiral Hood finally said. "It's good to see you."

"Thank you, sir. Same here," Roland replied.

Woolsey didn't even introduce McKay. He had to be even more embarrassed than Rodney. He just pointed everyone to their designated seats and waited until Admiral Hood sat down before doing so himself.

Once everyone had taken their places, though, the Admiral stood

again. "First of all," he said, "I'd like to thank you on behalf of the people of Earth and her colonies for everything you've done so far for us. We are forever in your debt, and we're eager to repay you in any way we can. I hope that, by the end of this day, we can call you our allies and friends, both personally and as a people."

As he sat back down, Woolsey took the same initiative and rose from his chair. "Thank you, Admiral Hood," he said, addressing him. He cleared his throat a bit before moving on. "While true friendship should never be based upon convenience, we know that throughout history, alliances have always been forged by reaching an agreement which will benefit both parties. I'm certain this will not be the exception. We'd like to be the first ones to bring to the table what we can offer. Colonel Carter?"

This is it, Sam thought. She took a deep breath. "In the last three days," she began, "I've had the privilege to learn more about your current technological level by studying your ship—which, I must say, is really amazing. Now, even though you've made a lot of progress in the last 500 years, we believe we can help you improve some things."

And during the next hour, she explained bit by bit everything she'd been rehearsing in her mind just before the arrival of their guests. As time passed by, she found it less difficult to speak. This was her domain, and she knew exactly what she was talking about. By the time she had finished, there was awe etched in the faces of everyone in the UNSC party. She could imagine they were trying to take in the full magnitude of what was being offered.

Several minutes passed before Admiral Hood let out a long whistle. "My, I'm not sure anymore if we'll be able to offer you anything of equal value in return," he said. "Would you still share all of this with us if that were the case?"

"Actually, sir," Roland broke in, "I think we _may_ have something to offer."

Both Admiral Hood and Captain Lasky raised their eyebrows and waited for the AI's proposal.

"Colonel Carter, if I may ask," Roland continued, "exactly how many _Daedalus_-class ships have you built and how long has it taken you to do so?"

Sam immediately glanced at Jack and Woolsey who exchanged looks before nodding at her. "We started production of the BC-304 eight years ago and built a ship per year since then."

"So, eight ships so far," Roland stated. "No pretense intended, but I'd like to point out the fact that UNSC shipyards in the Sol system and other colony worlds have always been able to produce entire fleets in that same amount of time. Now, I'm going to make a wild guess here and say that the reason why you have been unable to mass-produce warships—larger ones, too—is because you don't have enough facilities, resources, nor manpower, which in turn tells me you haven't taken enough people out there to colonize other star systems—and you said so yourself, as you told me you've spent the last 15 years establishing off-world bases on several planets via Stargate, and I noticed you used the word 'bases' instead of

'colonies'. This begs the question, 'Why?', and I think I know the answer." He made a dramatic pause before concluding. "The Stargate is still a secret in your world, isn't it?"

No one spoke a word for a while, until Sam cleared her throat and said, "It seems, Rodney, like you're not the smartest mind in three galaxies after all." Rodney frowned at this while Sam added, "You're right, Roland. You're completely, exactly right."

Roland smiled proudly.

"Only a handful of governments know about it," Woolsey said. "Our world isn't ready to learn about the Stargate yet."

"There's no need to defend your stance, Mr. Woolsey," Roland said. "We kept our war with the Covenant a secret, tooâ€"at least for a short while, until we were unable to hide it anymoreâ€"so we understand. I didn't meant to make you uncomfortable with my statement. In fact, I just mentioned it because, as I said before, I think we can offer you something."

At this point, Admiral Hood's eyes glowed with realization. "Facilities, resources, and manpower," he repeated.

"Exactly, sir," Roland said. "Since you've already offered to help us find Naquadah-rich planets, I suggest we share with you a small percentage of any Naquadah we mine and lend you our facilities and manpower to build more ships. You could have an entire fleet of 304s within a year. If you approve it, sir," he added.

"Wouldn't you have unlimited access to the 304's specs if we agreed to this?" Jack said.

"If you're worried we'll just take that which you're not offering us from said specs, let me put your mind at ease, General," Admiral Hood said. "As much as many of my colleagues would love to see your weaponry implemented in our own ships, I respect your decision not to share it and will not question the reasons behind it. I'm growing fond of Roland's idea, and I believe you're interested, too. If you prefer to bring in your own people to install your weapons on your ships, we will not object. We just want to be of assistance in any way possible."

"Are you serious?" Rodney asked.

"There's only one other thing I'd like to ask of you, if possible," Admiral Hood continued. "I gather you already have a lot of experience dealing with alien technologyâ€"even some aid from said aliens themselves. We, on the other hand, are still new to it, despite our best efforts to understand everything the Forerunners apparently left behind for us. If you're willing to help us decipher their legacy, maybe we can share it with each other."

"You mean, we can both keep any cool stuff we findâ€"weapons, ships, else?" Again, it was Rodney who brought up the question. Admiral Hood just nodded.

Sam was impressed by the man's cleverness and cunning. Without Jack or Woolsey stating anything out loud, the Admiral had been able to read between lines and figure out what wasn't on the table.

Moreover, he had just said he didn't care as long as this alliance could be forged. Obviously, he saw the value in a long-term relationship and the trust that could be built along the way. Eventually, given enough time, her people would willingly share the rest of their tech with the UNSC, and by then, they would also give away something that would benefit them both.

Brilliant.

Jack and Woolsey seemed to ponder about it for a while. Finally, both men smiled.

* * *

><p>Atlantis, the Ark

1751 hrs. August 16, 2013

Twice. That was the number of times Daniel had seen an alien horizonâ€”the oceans of Lantea and M35-117â€”from this balcony before. Now, he could add the oceans of the Ark to that list.

This was the first time in a week Daniel ventured out of his room or Janus' Labâ€”or the mess hall, which he'd only visited occasionally to get something to eat before returning to one of the former. Aside from Sam's visit, he hadn't seen or spoken to anyone during this time. He'd had a lot to think about.

Shortly after he'd been left alone in that lab, Daniel had begun wondering if it hadn't been some sort of dream or hallucination. But he knew in his heart that it wasn't. And she told me to follow it, Daniel thought. He trusted in what he had experienced, even if he didn't quite understand it.

He truly believed he would've been nothing more than a nuisance during the talks that had taken place in the last few days, since he would've been unable to refrain himself from asking more about Halsey's pastâ€”or rather, to make them remember about it. Sometimes a friendly reminder of someone's past actions and intentions helped gain some perspective into said person's present deeds.

He'd taken upon himself to make sure that would happen, eventually. But the proper time was yet to come.

In the meantime, he kept trying to understand the warning she'd given him. He'd been recalling every single enemy SG-1 and the Atlantis expedition had ever found, no matter how small it had been at the time. He even made a listâ€”no less than three times in a row. Some of the memories gave him gooseflesh and made him wonder if there could indeed be something even worse.

Then he remembered Halsey's account of the Flood.

Could that be the new threat he'd been told about? How could it be? Halsey had told him the Flood had been completely wiped out years ago. Unless they had managed to survive the firing of a Halo, there was no way the Flood would resurface. Besides, if any Flood had remained behind in hiding, there would already have been another outbreak on a galactic scale. Those things were just too similar to

the Replicatorsâ€”their need to consume and acquire knowledge was insatiable.

So, if not the Flood or the Covenant, and definitely not the Goa'uld, the Ori, the Replicators, or the Wraithâ€”who or what could be coming that could be any more dangerous?

The door behind him hissed, and he heard Sam's voice behind him. "Hey, Daniel" she said.

"Hey," he replied dryly and without turning.

"Nice view," Sam said, joining him at the railing, "for an artificial construct."

Daniel didn't reply. He wasn't being impolite; his mind was simply too busy to focus on anything else.

"We missed you at the signing of the agreement," Sam continued. "Even Teal'c and Ronon were there."

That much Daniel knew. He'd heard the comments at the mess hall about the signing that had taken place the day before, thus formally declaring the alliance. Again, he displayed no interest in it.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Sam said, "C'mon, Daniel. You know I trust and believe in your good judgment, but no one can be right about everything all the timeâ€”not even you. Maybe it's time for you to accept at least the possibility that Halsey may be an exception toâ€”"

"She doesn't think the same," Daniel muttered.

"How can you even know that? She's gone. She escaped and she's not coming back."

"I wasn't talking about Catherine," Daniel said a bit louder. "I was taking about Oma."

This time, it was Sam who fell silent, and when Daniel looked at her, he saw surprised etched on her face. Naturally, she would've never expected to hear that name again, let alone in this conversation and in this context.

Sam looks like she was trying to find the right words to reply. He doubted for a split-second about telling her of her recent encounter, but Sam was a friendâ€”one of his best friends, tooâ€”and he knew he could trust her with it. "Sam, I saw Oma Desala a week ago," he said with certainty and conviction.

Sam's eyes widened at this statement. Daniel expected her to question him about what he saw. He didn't mind; he knew her scientific-driven mind would find it hard to believe that an Ascended being who had sacrificed herself to stop Anubis years ago would simply reappear out of the blue. Of course, this wasn't the case, and he was ready to tell her everything Oma had said to him.

But before she could even pronounce a word, something above caught her attention.

Daniel turned to see what Sam was looking at. He spotted a small circle of light beyond the Ark's atmosphere—and realized what it was. He'd seen something similar from up close: a whirlpool of light.

Almost as in cue, he heard the humming of Atlantis' shield being raised. Feeling a bit reassured by this, he followed Sam back into Stargate Operations where Rodney was already busying himself, dancing between consoles and computers and shoving people out of his way in the process. "Talk to me, Rodney," Sam said.

"Sensors just detected an object coming out of nowhere," McKay replied. "Our long-range sensors aren't yet calibrated to detect ships traveling through Slipspace, so I thought we'd better be safe than sorry. I'm sending a message to Caldwell, see if he can give us some insight on our newly arrived 'visitor'. I've also alerted Woolsey and our guests of its presence. Hopefully they just forgot to mention they were expecting company."

"I'm afraid we aren't, Dr. McKay," Captain Lasky said as he walked up the stairs.

"Thought so," Rodney replied. One of the consoles suddenly beeped; McKay pressed a button and said, "_Daedalus_, what've you got?"

"_Covenant ship, _CCS_-class,"_ Caldwell replied.

"Just the one?" Sam asked.

"_Just the one,"_ Caldwell confirmed. "_It emerged in front of us and is holding position roughly within _Infinity_'s kill zone."_

"How unwise of them," Lasky said. "_Daedalus_, can you move in to intercept?"

"_Already on it, Captain."_

"Wait," Rodney said. "We're—| receiving a transmission. Audio, video, _and_ text."

His fingers flew all over the keyboard of one of the computers. Then, he pointed at one of the screens behind him and pressed a few more buttons. When the image came in, Daniel's heart leaped, although he was uncertain whether if out of glee or fear. Or maybe both.

The text read, "_Do not fire. We're not here to harm you. In fact, we've come to warn you of a new, relentless enemy who's started to make its presence known among the Covenant. Please, listen to what we have to say."_

Were it some Sangheili's face being displayed in the center of the screen, everyone would at least have given it the benefit of the doubt. Daniel could only hope they would still do the same with the person staring at them through the video feed with the most emotionless expression he'd ever seen.

It was Halsey.

* * *

><p>AN: I'm afraid I suck at describing diplomatic affairs. Still, I hope this chapter was to your liking.**

I will no longer apologize **nor offer any explanation ****for the delay in posting this chapter. ****Sometimes ****life just keeps you busier than you'd like, so from now on, I'll just update whenever I can. No more void promises. I _would_ love to finish this story soon, but I won't lose any sleep if I don't update on a regular basis. I just hope you bear with me. I can assure you, it will be well worth it (yes, I've said so before).**

SPOILER ALERT: My working title for the next chapter is "Precursors". Hope to see y'all soon!

Oh, and don't forget to review on your way out. Have a nice week!

16. Chapter 16: Precursors

A/N: I'm dead serious here. If for some reason you still haven't read the part in the Forerunner Saga about the Precursors and the origins of the Flood, close this window and go read it **_now_****!**

You may also want to reread Chapter 5 (Unexpected Visitors) just so as to not get too lost with this one. Enjoy!

* * *

><p>Stargate Operations

Atlantis, the Ark

1759 hrs. **August 16, 2013**

"What are you doing here?" Lasky asked. Halsey didn't reply.

"Oh, sorry," McKay said. "I haven't opened a channel."

Lasky didn't hear any keystrokes, though. He turned to see him sitting still, gazing upon Colonel Carter. McKay hadn't just stated a fact; he was asking for permission from _his_ superiors to act.

"Colonel Caldwell, is the ship making any hostile moves?" Colonel Carter asked.

"Negative. No power readings from their plasma turretsâ€"not even its shields are raised."

"Battle damage?"

"The hull looks intact."

Lasky was waiting for the other shoe to drop any second now. After what had happened almost two weeks ago, he couldn't just trust Halseyâ€"she always had some secret agenda. On the other hand, maybe her latest plan had backfired on her and this was a desperate attempt

to gain some sort of help from her former human comrades.

Or maybe she was telling the truth. Damn, Dr. Jackson may've been right, after all_, he thought.

Mr. Woolsey, General O'Neill, Lord Hood, and Sully, all chose that moment to arrive at Stargate Operations, escorted by Blue Team. Colonel Carter briefed them into the situation in less than ten seconds.

"Open a channel," Woolsey said. This time, McKay got to work without hesitation. He nodded at Woolsey when he was done. "Dr. Halsey, this is Richard Woolsey, leader of the Atlantis Expedition. May I know the purpose of your presence here?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear your rank," Halsey replied. The video feed was indeed live, not just some prerecorded message.

"I don't have one," Woolsey said. "I'm a civilian appointed as commander of Atlantis by the International Oversight Advisory and Homeworld Command."

"I don't recognize the authority."

"You don't have to. All you need to know is that our world is now formally allied to the UEG, and as their allies, we will consider any action you take against them and act of war against us. You've seen what we're capable of, and I don't think you'd like to test our resolve."

"Well, Mr. Woolsey. It's good to know the UNSC has managed to make some good friends." Lasky expected to hear some resentful comment like 'watch your backs' or something like that. Instead, he was surprised to hear her say, "God knows we'll need them." He also noted her use of the pronoun 'we'.

"Is this some kind of threat?" Lord Hood asked stoically.

"More of a warning, Lord Hood," Halsey said. "Now listen carefully. If you accept my surrender, I'll tell you everything we know about this new enemy we recently found."

Lasky, just like everyone else, was taken aback. After all she'd done, Halsey was actually surrendering herself to UNSC authority?

"I have but one condition, though. My ship and crew will remain in orbit for as long as I am with you. You must promise not to harm any of them. You kill any of them, you lose me and any intel I may have been able to give you."

That was a suicide threat. Lasky wouldn't put it past her to do so if push came to shove. Even without a weapon or a cyanide pill, she'd find a way—if she hadn't already.

"I've activated a locator beacon," Halsey continued. "You can beam me to whatever location you deem appropriate. I'll be waiting for your response." The feed died.

"I say we take her out now," Sully said, which earned him several

serious looks. "For all we know, she's planted that beacon on a bomb or worse! We can't trust a word this woman says! She's a lying, manipulative b@tch!"

"We get the point, Major," Lord Hood said. "But we can't just blow her ship out of the sky like that."

"Why not? She's within _Infinity_'s firing range. A single MAC round should do the job."

"We _can't_," Lord Hood insisted.

"Oh, please! Sir, are we really going all moralistic on this? Because with all due respect, the time for morality in regard to Catherine Halsey is long due past!"

"Shut up!" Dr. Jackson exclaimed. "She had no reasonâ€"no reason at allâ€"to return, yet she's just risked everything to come here and warn us of some _real, serious danger_, knowing that her own life and those of her crew were all but done for the second she left Slipspace in front of _Infinity_! I think that shows some degree of moral conscience, and the least we owe her is the benefit of the doubt and a chance to listen to her!"

Lasky wanted to object, but something stopped him from doing so. He recalled his own nagging sensation from the last few weeks about the impending rise of a new enemyâ€"like a voice telling him about it. Dr. Jackson seemed convinced that the danger _was_ real, and Lasky wondered if he'd felt something similar. For the first time, he believed he had something in common with Daniel Jackson.

"Sir, we do give our war criminals a chance to have a proper trial, don't we?" Lasky said, almost imperceptibly. He wasn't sure about this, but for better or for worse, Dr. Jackson was right about that, at least. "I mean, that's why HIGHCOM gave us orders to track her down after the Requiem mission, isn't it? Now she's _willingly_ surrendering to us."

"You support this, Tom?" Sully said defiantly.

"That's _Captain Lasky_ to you, Major Sullivan," Lasky replied somewhat pissed off by his friend's attitude. "And yes, I support this, Lord Hood. She's been among 'Mdama's forces for some time now. Who knows what kind of intel she may have?"

"What are you suggesting, Captain?" Lord Hood asked.

"Halsey seems to care a lot about those Elites," Lasky said. "Almost like she's grown attached to them. We can use that to our advantage."

"Use their lives as leverage," Lord Hood stated. "We ensure their safety as long as she cooperates with us, maybe even get that Forerunner artifact back." He turned to General O'Neill and Woolsey. "Could you please help us transport her to _Infinity_ for interrogation?"

"I know of a better place to do that," Woolsey said. He told McKay to contact the Covenant ship, and within the minute, the screen displayed once again Halsey's face. "Dr. Halsey, we agree to your

terms, _but_ you must also agree to ours. Once we beam you away from your ship, it will remain exactly the way it isâ€”no shields, no weapons powered up. Your crew will not be allowed to leave it at any time. If we detect the slightest hint of a setup, we'll blow it to kingdom come. Is that understood?"

"Don't you worry, Mr. Woolsey. I had already left orders to do exactly what you ask for."

"Very well, then. Stand by for transportation." Then, Woolsey ordered the defense teams to take positions at the Gate and said to Lord Hood, "You may want to have your Spartan detachment ready, too."

"Understood," Lord Hood replied and nodded to the Spartans who immediately trotted downstairs to form a circle in front of the Gate.

Finally, Woolsey nodded at McKay who quickly reopened the channel with the _Daedalus_. "Colonel Caldwell, you may proceed when ready." Almost immediately, the video feed showed Halsey being beamed away, and a couple seconds later, Lasky heard the hum of the marvelous Asgard transport system bringing her in.

Jackson was the first one to move away from the screen and walk down the stairs. Lasky and everyone else soon followed. And after almost a year of tracking and searching, there she was, not dressed in a lab coat but in a sophisticated armor, surrounded by Spartans, once more under UNSC custody: Dr. Catherine Elizabeth Halsey.

Ronon Dex arrived shortly thereafter, particle magnum at the ready. Woolsey told him to guide the Spartans to 'the brig' while Lord Hood spoke to Sully's ear. Lasky couldn't quite hear everything and wondered what was that all about until he approached him and spoke to his ear, just like he did with Sully. "I'll have a word with General O'Neill and Mr. Woolsey before we question her ourselves," he said. "In the meantime, go with Major Sullivan. Make sure he doesn't antagonize her any further."

"Yes, sir," Lasky replied, though he didn't know how to prevent Sully from doing so. His old friend was obviously pissed by the treatment he'd received as Halsey's prisoner, and now that the roles were reversedâ€”|

He just hoped things wouldn't eventually backfire on them all.

* * *

><p>Atlantis, the Ark

0143 hrs. October 21, 2558 (Military Calendar)

_'Not to antagonize me any further.' Yeah, like _that_ was possible, Halsey thought. Yes, she _had_ heard Lord Hood speaking those words to Lasky. There was nothing more the UNSC could do to bother her than what they had done in the last few years.

For the last half hour, she'd been putting up with the interrogationâ€”more like a series of aggressive, accusatory statements Major Sullivan kept making about herâ€”without as much as

flinching or blinking. She had expected that to happen. Such was the price of her actions. Part of her dreaded what would most certainly come next—both for her and her Elites—, but her conscience kept telling her that coming back had been the right thing to do.

And she had someone to thank for reawakening that conscience. A little too much, perhaps.

Her suicide threat had not been void. Her armor was not only rigged to blow up if anyone tried to remove it—something she'd been tempted not to tell Major Sullivan when he suggested it—but also if any single one of her Elites' locator chips stopped transmitting their signals while she was under custody. She didn't mind dying anymore; she knew it was what she deserved, anyway. After her departure from the Hammond, she had started to realize a lot of things she'd been ignoring about her choices, and eventually she'd come to terms with the fact that she would never be able to do anything to atone for her lifelong sins.

That was, until she'd arrived at Hesduros.

The massive door in front of her cell opened, allowing her Spartans to rush inside and take positions around it, weapons at the ready. She kept wondering all the time what did they think of her now. She pushed the thoughts aside when she saw the large group of people walking into the room. She made a quick headcount: Lord Hood; Lasky; Sullivan; the bald man with glasses who had introduced himself as Woolsey; Colonels Carter and Mitchell; Teal'c; the big guy with dreadlocks who had guided her escorts to this very room. Although she didn't recognize them, she also took note of the two other men in uniform—one in his mid-sixties, and the other in his mid-forties—and the short woman. Quite a welcoming committee, she thought.

And finally, all the way to the back of this small crowd, Daniel. Halsey had to suppress a smile of relief. This was not a time for showing emotion.

"Alright," Sullivan said. "I think it's time for you to tell us exactly what you're up to."

Halsey didn't speak. She wouldn't speak to this minion of Osman's. She looked directly at Lord Hood, hoping he would make the question this time.

And he did. "Doctor Halsey," he said, "you said you came here to warn us. So, what is it you wanted to warn us about?"

If there was a thing she liked about Lord Hood, it was his trademark diplomacy, no matter who he spoke to. That and Daniel's presence in the room made her more comfortable. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "After we left this place, we set course for a planet called Hesduros," she began. "It's a Sangheili colony world to which 'Mdama arrived when he escaped from Trevelyan. Most of his troops and resources came from there, which is why 'Mdama has tried hard to keep its existence a secret from the Arbiter and the UNSC. My crew and I went there to—| procure some equipment we needed to help our movement."

"Your movement?" Lord Hood asked.

"Yes," Halsey replied. "A small religious splinter group of Elites who disagree with both the Arbiter's _and_ 'Mdamas ideologies. My people."

"You created this splinter faction?"

"No. It had already been created by the time I joined 'Mdamas ranks. I earned their trust, and they made me their leader."

Halsey heard Sullivan mutter, 'They deserve what they get.' She ignored his comment and continued. "Hesduros is heavily guarded by a large fleet at all times. We knew that it would be difficult for us to get what we needed without them detecting at us, but we had to take the risk. When we came out of Slipspace, though, it wasn't a mighty Sangheili fleet what we found."

She paused. She had to. The image was still too freshâ€| too terrifyingâ€| "The fleet had been turned to scrap. The ships weren't destroyed; they were just crippled. And there was something else there. Another fleet consisting of ships unlike anything I've seen before." Again she paused. Despite seeing it with her own eyes, her mind still couldn't accept it. "We scanned the planet's surface with our sensors. No life signs. Instead, it was covered with hundreds of those shipsâ€"triangular ships of varying sizes, organic in design. And they were growing. Ships _grown_, not _built_."

This time, she heard the younger man in uniform whispering to Lasky, 'Wraith. We've fought them before; no big deal'.

"Whoever was behind that attack," she continued, trying to dismiss what she'd just heard, "they are quite capable of inflicting considerable damage to Covenant ships. And they're _growing up_ a fleet of massive proportions. I don't know what they're after, but if they come against you, I'm afraid you won't stand a chance. That's what I came to warn you about."

"Do you have anything to support your claim?" Sullivan asked with a tone of sarcasm.

"I can ask my crew to transmit all our sensor data to you," Halsey replied. "Other than that, I just have my word to back me."

"Well, we certainly _can't_ trust in _that_," Sullivan said.

"Yes, you can," someone behind Lord Hood said. "She _is_ telling the truth."

Virtually everyone turned to see who that voiceâ€"a woman'sâ€"belonged to. Halsey thought at first it was the short woman she'd seen before, but then she spotted her at Lord Hood's far left. It wasn't until he moved to his side that Halsey was able to see the person standing at Daniel's right. She had brown hair and a beatific smile, and she was wearing a white suit. She literally seemed to be irradiating her own light, which was why everyone in the room seemed shocked by herâ€"except Daniel. In fact, he looked glad, relieved to see her, almost like he'd been expecting her to show up here.

It occurred to Halsey that this could be the one who had helped

Daniel ascend. She definitely had a supernatural appearanceâ€"and for Halsey to admit something like that, it took a lot. But there was something about this being that seemed familiarâ€|

Then, the woman looked directly into Halsey's eyes. Her gaze was piercing yet peacefulâ€| and that was when she knew. She'd met her less than a year beforeâ€"or rather, her AI copy.

"Youâ€| you are Librarian. Wife of Didact."

The woman nodded at her.

Halsey caught a glimpse of Daniel's reaction to this. His shock at this statement seemed even bigger than that of everyone around him.

* * *

><p>Atlantis, the Ark

1850 hrs. **August 16, 2013**

The Librarian?! Daniel thought. No, that couldn't be. Orâ€| could it?

While he didn't know everything about the enigmatic Forerunner, he knew from the IsoDidact's record that she had ascended long ago. In fact, according to it, Merlin himself had met herâ€|

Oh my God. Oma's sudden appearance in the room had encouraged him, but this revelation changed everything. He looked at Oma expectantly, in his eyes a plea to know whether Halsey's statement was true or not.

Oma's gaze met his, and again, she smiled. "Lightning flashes, sparks showerâ€|"

She raised her arms, and her human appearance faded as she retook her non-corporeal Ascended form. Then, it began taking on another formâ€"a taller one, almost twice her previous size. When her transformation was complete, he was surprised to see a beautiful creature who, despite being quite different, still held a close resemblance to the person he'd come to know as Oma Desala.

"â€|in one blink of an eye, you have missed seeing." Even her voice changed when she spoke these words.

So it was true; Oma was not an Ancient, as Daniel had always thought, but a Furling. A Forerunner.

She was the Librarian.

"Why?" Daniel thought out loud, his whispered question floating in the air and carrying the weight of many others. Why did you have to lie? Why did you keep this from me? Why the need to use a disguise?_

"You already knew about me, Daniel," she said. "You learned about my true identity before I descended you. It's part of the knowledge I hid within your subconscious, and that was gone the moment you died

at the hand of the Replicator version of Samantha Carter. Even in spite of that, you know the answer to your own question."

Daniel pondered on her words for a moment and found out that he did know. "You chose to take on a human appearance because it would make it easier for us humans to identify ourselves with you whenever you made your presence known," he said.

"Your kind has always attributed its own characteristics to those beings they worship, whether they call them gods, spirits, or else," she said. "Humans always wish them to be like they are; it makes them less impersonal. Knowing this, if you wished to help them find the path to enlightenment, wouldn't you choose to take on their own appearance rather than show yourself before them in this form?"

Daniel had never been able to be mad at Oma, and this time wasn't the exception especially because her logic made all the sense in the world. "Yes, I would," he replied with a grin. "And I understand." But there was something he still wanted to know. If Oma Desala was a fiction, a smokescreen to conceal her identity, who was she in reality?

The answer would come without him having to ask that question.

Needless to say, most everyone else was still shocked and had a 'what's-going-on-here' look in their faces. Those who'd paid attention to the IsoDidact's record when Daniel had read it would at least know a bit about Ascension and that the Librarian had moved on to a higher plane of existence long ago. Yet to hear something and to see it with one's own eyes

Oma the Librarian looked into the eyes of each and every person in the room, one by one, before speaking again. "Daniel has always known me as Oma Desala, while you know me as the Librarian a title conferred to me in my youth. My true name is First-Light-Weaves-Living-Song, and I am an Ascended Furling." She paused to let that sink in. "When I left this plane after the Halos were fired and the galaxy was reseeded, I spent several tens of thousands of years watching from afar how life was reborn, how it evolved and thrived once more. Then, when I was pleased with the fruits of our labor as former caretakers, I journeyed to the same galaxy my kind went to. There, I met other Ascended beings, both Alterans and Furlings, and I learned about their rules of non-interference which upheld their belief that they had no right to meddle with the evolution of others.

"At first, I myself abided by those rules. But when the Goa'uld took over the galaxy and I saw that the Others cared not about the 'lowers' as they had the nerve to call them, I decided to go against those ridiculous, strict rules. That is how my mission to help other people ascend began. But when I unknowingly made the mistake of helping the evil Goa'uld Anubis reach that status, I realized that the rules were there for a reason. Led by my former Forerunner nature, I had chosen to ignore them. And now, once again, I was guilty of committing a terrible sin.

"I tried to undo what I had done, but I couldn't. When the Others found out, they decided to punish me by half-descending Anubis and

allowing him to do what he pleased, as long as he didn't use his Ascended powersâ€¦ and there would be nothing I would be able to do to stop him. But even then, I believed that the only way I would be able to make up for my horrible mistake would be by keep helping people ascend whenever I could. And so, I kept breaking the same rule.

"Then, I met Daniel Jackson. I helped him ascend. And that turned out to be the best thing I had ever done."

She looked at Daniel when she said this last statement, and he felt overcome by it. If she had ever told him that before descending him, he'd obviously forgotten.

"When he joined us, I intended to teach him, to guide him along the Great Path, our unending Journey towards knowledge," she continued. "Instead, he taught me. Through his eyes, I began understanding things I had been unable to see in thousands of years. In the end, his heart and his actions inspired me to leave everything else behind and stop Anubis from destroying everything, and eventually, they also inspired another Ascended Furling to help me bring that evil creature to an end. Sadly, despite our success and the fact that what we had done had been the right thing to do, the Others did not approve of this, and they banished us from Daniel's galaxy forever.

"While at first we felt disappointed by this, it was for the best, for had we not been exiled, we would've never been able to warn you all about a terrible truth we've learned." After a short pause, she concluded, "We came here today to let you know that what Catherine Halsey has told you is true."

"We?" Daniel thought out loud. So, the 'mighty warrior' is here as well._

A mighty warriorâ€¦ another Ascended Furlingâ€¦

Oh, my._

In a split-second, every piece of information Daniel had overlooked so far fell into place. Just as he realized exactly who she'd been referring to, the sudden appearance of a second Ascended Furling, even taller than her, confirmed his suspicion.

* * *

><p>Atlantis, the Ark

1853 hrs. **August 16, 2013**

Sheppard had only met Ascended beings twice in his lifeâ€"still enough times to know one when he saw it. That's why he hadn't been as shocked as the UNSC folks when he saw her appear out of nowhere. Her transformation, though, had left him speechless. By now, he was pretty much the same way as everyone elseâ€"at a loss. But when the second guy appearedâ€¦

'Overwhelmed' would've been a misnomer. People from both parties of the newly formed alliance either shielded their eyes, almost fell backwards, or just stood still with a blank stare. Sheppard was among the latter. The only unique reaction came from one of the Spartans

who immediately raised his particle magnum and fired at the newcomer's head. The shot, of course, just went harmlessly through him and hit the ceilingâ€”at which point the Spartan simply assumed the same bemused stance as Sheppard's.

"You can put your weapon away, Reclaimer," the tall Ascended said. "Besides there being neither need nor use for it, I'm not the same Didact you've fought."

"You're the IsoDidact," Sheppard heard Daniel say. "The one who wrote the Furling Record we found."

"Indeed, Daniel Jackson," the IsoDidact replied.

"What kind of treachery is this?!" Major Sullivan finally managed to shriek, looking at Halsey with an accusative gaze.

"The river tells no lies, though standing on the shore the dishonest man still hears them," the Librarian calmly said. "I assure you, this is no treachery whatsoeverâ€”and deep within, you all know it, even if some of you don't want to admit it for fear of being wrong about this woman."

Sheppard could only imagine the shame Sullivan would be feeling now. Effortlessly, the Librarian had silenced himâ€”the only person in the room who held an obvious murderous grudge against Halseyâ€”for good.

"Didact, what exactly is going on?" Daniel asked with the most respectful tone. "What's so pressing about this invasion that it has you this troubled?"

"See for yourselves, Reclaimers," the IsoDidact replied, raising his hands.

And with that, Sheppard suddenly found himself peacefully suspended in the middle of space, stars and galaxies surrounding him, yet at the same time still standing in the room. It was a somewhat pleasant sensation. The closest thing he could compare this sensation to was the time when Chaya Sarâ€”the Ascended Ancient they'd encountered during their first year in Pegasusâ€”'shared' her essence with him. Maybe these two Ascended Furlings were doing the same with him, and possibly even with the rest of the people in the room. In fact, he could see everyone else 'floating' near him.

A large number of blurry shapes in the distance gradually became clearer. They were ships, or at least, Sheppard thought they had to be ships. Two massive fleets belonging to two different alien factions fighting each otherâ€”and one of them was sorely losing.

"What you now see is our first sin, the crime our kind committed against the Mantle," he heard the Didact's voice inside his mind. "This is the culmination of the war waged by our ancestors against the Precursors."_

The battle Sheppard was witnessing was at its peakâ€”and in a moment, it was over. The scene then switched to that of a lone ship drifting across the void between galaxies he already knew all too well from the many times he'd been aboard the Daedalus as it carried out

specific missions out there. The ship was not even being propelled by any kind of propulsion system; it simply was in no apparent hurry to reach its destination.

"Very few Precursors managed to escape from our purge, and most of them chose to turn themselves into a dust that could regenerate their past form long after this war," the Didact continued. _"This dust was stored in hundreds of automated ships which would later return to our galaxy. Some of them, however, were programmed to journey to other distant stars. The one you see arrived at Pegasus roughly around the same time as we did after our departure from the Ark."_

The ship was now entering the atmosphere of a world Sheppard had only visited a couple of weeks ago. The Wraith homeworld.

"The vessel crashed upon this abandoned planet's surface, and after a few decades, it was overcome by vegetation and fauna. A species in particular made of the wreckage their home, since it possessed the dark and dank conditions it preferred for its nests."

"Oh, please don't tell me," Sheppard thought out loud.

"The Lanteans later called this creature Iratus," the Didact said, confirming Sheppard's suspicion. Before his eyes, the ghastly sight of thousands of bugs crawling into the wrecked ship gave him the worst goose bumps ever.

"I hate those things," Sheppard said. He was sure he'd seen an amused grin in the faces of both the Didact and the Librarian when he said this.

"Eventually, the glassy cylinders containing the Precursor dust were crushed under the weight of large swarms of Iratus insects, which then became covered with it, infected by it," the Didact went on. _"They had a rather unique way of feeding themselves, as some of you already know. This would turn out to be a decisive trait later on. The genetic material within the dust in our galaxy began evolving and manifesting itself in those living beings touched by it after many centuries. Something similar happened in this case; however, it found in these insects the perfect carriers, living vessels in which their gene plan could be passed down from one generation to another until a more suitable host could be found."_

"The insects' main prey was a large mammal which bred in large numbers, thus preventing it from overpopulating the planet, but it didn't suit the needs required to allow for a proper regeneration or recreation of the Precursors' physical form. So they waited for millennia, patiently, safe within the insects' shells, in the hopes that a more suitable host would evolve or that a more advanced sentient life form would arrive at the planet. The latter happened more quickly than the former."

"The Ancients seeded humans in that world," Teyla stated.

"No," the Didact replied, much to Sheppard's "and surely everyone else's in the Atlantis expedition" surprise. Even the Lanteans had been certain that they had been indirectly responsible for the evolution of the Wraith when they transplanted humans there. Had they been wrong all along?

"_A group of Lanteans had journeyed to this world to establish a new research colony without the knowledge or the sanction of the Lantean Council in Atlantis. They didn't know about the danger this planet concealed and began roaming freely in it. Then, the inevitable happened._

"The Lanteans always believed that the Wraith had evolved after several thousands of years. In reality, it happened in an instant. The insects, guided by the Precursor essences within them, attacked and overwhelmed the Lantean population. When they attempted to feed on them, the Precursors genetic material passed down by many generations of insects transferred itself into the Lanteans, incorporating the gene plan of the Iratus insects as well, and causing a near-instant metamorphosis in them. This was the dawn of the Wraith."

Sheppard watched in horror as a visibly new Lantean settlement was suddenly invaded by millions of Iratus bugs during the night. The eerie wails of the population slowly became growls as every Lantean he saw became a Wraith.

The Librarian took over. _"Some of you already know how the Flood came into beingâ€"how the parasite itself was, for all intents and purposes, a twisted version of the Precursors themselves, the race we had once worshipped and revered as divine beingsâ€"and what it took to eradicate them. The day the Halos were fired, I learned an important thing about the Precursors. The greatest of all the Graveminds that were created during our war against the Flood conveyed a message for me within the rotting corpses of consumed humans. They told me that the Precursors lived in many shapes, flesh and spirit, primitive and advanced, spacefaring and locked to their worlds; they evolved over and over again, died away, were reborn, explored, and seeded many galaxies. Now we know that the Wraith were intended to be the latest form of the Precursors. This transformation didn't come without a price, though."_

"Incorporating the gene plan of three different species into a single one was more taxing than expected," the Didact said.
"Therefore, the Precursor essences were no longer strong enough to take over the bodies they had possessed. The nature of the Iratus insect corrupted the Lantean minds; they lost all understanding of who they were and acquired new, devious personalities. Led by a consuming need to feed, they became a terrible race which used the knowledge of the Precursors still buried deep inside to build their society and technology and venture out to other stars in search for food. The rest, you know."

"That still doesn't change the fact that the Wraith are way behind us, technologically speaking," Rodney said. He was about to add something, but the Didact interrupted him.

"Not anymore," he said.

"Yeah, we know about the tech they scavenged from that Covenant cruiser, butâ€" "

"You don't know the half of it, Reclaimer," the Didact insisted.
"That cruiser didn't arrive at the Wraith homeworld by chance. It was the Precursors' will."

Rodney fell silent. No one else said another word.

Again, the scene changed drastically. Now, Sheppard was gazing at a large ring—a massive artificial ring—orbiting a planet, a gas giant. The ring's inner surface was covered in landmasses and water bodies much in the same way as the Ark. _So, this is what a Halo looks like, _ Sheppard thought. The events kept 'playing' as the Didact continued to speak.

"Almost four hundred years ago, a Covenant fleet found Delta Halo by accident. Before communicating this discovery to their capital city of High Charity, some Covenant troops began exploring several of the ring's facilities, and in their reckless meddling, they released the Flood. The Covenant knew nothing about it, and they were no match for the relentless parasite. They were infected, and then the new Flood troops used the same transport ships in which the Covenant had descended to Halo's surface to return to the fleet and infest it. Not even one ship managed to escape.

"Most Shipmasters crashed their ships on the ring so as to deny the Flood any means to escape from it. Most of the Flood then began assaulting the Library—which resulted in the immediate creation of a Sentinel wall to quarantine the sector and contain the Flood—, but some of the infected fought their way to one of the crashed ships—a Covenant light cruiser. By then, a Gravemind had already been formed and the ring's Monitor had been captured. Coordinated by this foul creature, the parasite managed to crudely repair the ship, and without the Monitor to activate the ring's countermeasures and defenses, the Flood left.

"However, instead of spreading in this galaxy, this new generation of Flood followed the Gravemind's instructions, and guided by its knowledge of the destination of that ancient automated ship, they headed for the Wraith homeworld in Pegasus. Unlike the ship carrying the Precursor dust, this one made use of Slipspace travel and, just three years ago, finally arrived at its destination.

"Its timing couldn't have been better for them. After five years of war against the Atlantis expedition, most of the Wraith had retreated there to reorganize and unite themselves. They were taken by surprise when the Flood arrived, and the parasite infected every single one of them. Even their ships were consumed by its spores. But something else happened then."

"The Flood is another form of Precursors," Sam repeated. "Its spores carry the same DNA as the dust that infected the Iratus bugs. By infecting the Wraith, they provided the last piece of the puzzle."

Both the Didact and the Librarian looked at Sam in amazement. _"You are as smart as you are wise, Reclaimer," _ the Librarian said.

_"Indeed, the stronger spores which the Flood brought served to strengthen and complement the Precursor gene plan hidden inside the Wraith, completing the transformation that had begun ten thousand years before," _ the Didact said.

Sheppard now understood not only what had happened to the Wraith but

also how they'd been able to survive, despite all evidence showing that they were definitely dead. Still, he had to speak his mind to be sure. "So, you're saying that the Wraith are no longer Wraith?" he asked.

"They are still physically Wraith," the Didact said, "but their minds are now the minds of the Precursors. And they have acquired a new ability."

"The ability to infect others and turn them into Flood," Teyla said. "That's what happened on M9R-748 when we went there to retrieve the ZPMs. They attacked the human population there. So, the Flood are now at the service of the Wraith—the Precursors. And they're building up their numbers in this galaxy."

"You are correct, human," the Didact said. Sheppard took notice of something there. He'd been using the term 'Reclaimer' to address most of the people in the room—except Daniel, who he'd called by name. What was different about Teyla that made him call her 'human' instead of 'Reclaimer'?

The sense of floating in the midst of a void faded away. Sheppard was back in the brig. He felt the need to look at his watch. He could've sworn several hours had passed, but it had been a mere seven minutes. He allowed himself to push aside his last question and just be amazed by the experience he'd just had.

* * *

><p>Atlantis, the Ark

1901 hrs. **August 16, 2013**

Silence settled upon the room after the Didact's final statement to Teyla. Anyone could've heard the sound of a pin dropping in this room.

Sam was still trying to digest everything she'd just seen and learned. Surely, she couldn't be the only one utterly shocked by all this. Also, while this wasn't her first face-to-face encounter with an Ascended being, this one had been too personal. She'd had her doubts when Daniel had told her about Oma visiting him, but now she was more than certain that it had happened. Oma herself had taken the time to speak directly into her mind during this out-of-world experience.

Simply put, she was flabbergasted.

"Why are they attacking us?" Daniel asked, breaking the silence.

"Revenge," the Didact replied. "The Precursors are trying to 'create' everything again, to 'bring unity', but they want to make sure that what they create will no longer rise against them like we once did. They will destroy and devour everything in their path to that end."

"How can we defeat such an enemy?" Captain Lasky seemingly thought out loud.

"That is something we are not allowed to reveal," the Didact says. "If we were to do so, the Others would step in and stop us."

"What? Why?" Daniel asked. "You've already been banished."

"We may have been banished, Daniel, but our mere presence here is already walking a very fine line," Omaâ€"the Librarianâ€"said. "You of all people know we can't break such a rule."

"But rest assured, Reclaimers," the Didact said. "You will find a way to defeat this scourge."

"We committed a great crime by activating the Halos," the Librarian added. "Pressed by the outcome of a losing war, we were forced to destroy every single, precious life in this galaxy to destroy the Flood. But you won't have to do the same thing. You can learn from our mistakes and stop the Precursors from consuming everything."

"There is no such thing as two different Earths or two different human races," the Didact stated. "You are one. You are all the Fifth Race, the true inheritors of the Mantle. And you will be the ones who will set all things right. This we knew even before we became part of the Alliance of Four Great Races. We made this known to them when we were tried in the very same world where the key to our redemption lay. Our victoryâ€| your victoryâ€| began there. We have placed our trust fully upon you. Your role is clear. If there is any hope in preserving the future, it lies with you and your people."

Then, both the Didact and the Librarian concluded with one voice. "Do not fail us."

And they vanished.

There was no dramatic disappearance. They simply were there one second, then gone the next.

In one blink of an eye, you have missed seeing, Sam repeated in her mind.

She became so absorbed with those last words she couldn't even pay attention to everyone else when they started to express their own questions and thoughts. She knew they were discussing this encounter and the revelation that came with it, but she just couldn't shake those final sentences. They were too cryptic. There was something about themâ€| somethingâ€|

Like a hidden messageâ€|

In the very same world where the key to our redemption layâ€|

She repeated that specific phrase in her mind several times. She'd been there when Daniel had read the Didact's recordâ€"both times, in fact. They were tried on Dakara, Sam thought. Dakara was the same world where the key to their redemption lay. That's where the Ancient superweapon was hidden.

And then it hit her.

"Guys?" she said in a whisper at first. "Guys?" she repeated louder. She finally realized that this had become a heated debate between everyone in the room. "HEY, PEOPLE!" she finally had to shout.

Every pair of eyes settled upon her.

"I think I know the solution to this problem," Sam said solemnly. "Butâ€¦ I'm not sure you're gonna like it."

* * *

><p>AN: Aaaaaand that was Chapter 16!
>

Before I forget to tell you (again; I've actually intended to tell you this since several chapters ago), I've been trying to keep the story as 'agreeable' with both universes' previously established canon as possible. Obviously, there's bound to be some differences as time goes by and new stories are published by 343i (yes, I'm talking about Mortal Dictata and the two new comic book series), so if there is a major difference at some point, this becomes AU.

I still believe both universes can coexist within a single one, along with several other sci-fi universes, and this story's been about them coming together and learning about each other's existence. So, until proven otherwise (and maybe even after that), I'll keep going with the ideas I'd already settled down for this fic. I hope you've been enjoying it so far, and I promise I won't let you down with what's coming next.

**Thanks for reading! Don't forget to review on your way out.

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17. Chapter 17: Teamwork

A/N: Hello everyone, and welcome to Chapter 17!

Just before we start, I'd like to say that I found it a bit funny that some of you got carried away by the "Dakara suerweapon" bit at the end of the previous chapter. Then again, I did write it that way to mislead you just a little and make of this chapter both a nice surprise and somewhat of a plot twist. I hope, dear reader, ** that by the time you're done reading it, you'll have loved every last part of it. So, without further ado, I'll leave you to it. Enjoy!

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* * *

><p>Atlantis conference room

Atlantis, the Ark

1917 hrs. **August 16, 2013**

"You want to do _what?!_" a choir of voices around the table shouted in unison.

Sam was kind of expecting that reaction from the UNSC people, but not from her own. After all they'd been through together, she'd expected them to trust her more. "I know it sounds crazy, but I still think that's what the Didact was trying to tell us."

"Your right," Jack said. "It crazy. Nuts. Wacko."

"Sir, you saw firsthand how effective the weapon on Dakara was," Sam said. "Once we recalibrated it, it helped us destroy the Replicators, and the Jaffa also managed to use it against the armies of the Ori twice before it was destroyed."

"Sam, none of us are denying how useful it was," Cam said. "But you're talking about something far more powerful and dangerous here."

"We've gone through a lot of trouble to find and decommission those things, and now you want to _activate_ them?" Captain Lasky asked.

"The Dakara device worked much in the same way as they do, and we were able to tune it to our own needs," Sam said. "I believe we could at least try and see if the same can be done with the Halos."

"Still, to activate that Array—" Admiral Hood said, his voice trailing off. He obviously didn't even want to consider the repercussions.

"It can't be that simple," Major Sullivan said. "If it were, why didn't the Forerunners do that with the Halos in the first place?"

"They were at war with the Flood—and losing, big time," Sam said. "From what I've been told, they only had a few hundred years to build the Array, whereas the Ancients may've had several thousand years to design and build the Dakara device."

"Weren't the Ancients suffering from a plague when they activated it, several million years ago?" McKay pointed out.

"Yes, but a disease will never be as pressing as a war, especially when you're losing," Sam said.

"Some of the most important technological breakthroughs have been achieved in war times," Admiral Hood said.

"And they're usually made by the winning side, sir," Sam said. "The only way for a losing side to win a war has almost always been by creating some sort of endgame device—like atomic bombs, for example."

"Point taken," Admiral Hood replied.

"The thing is, we're looking at remarkably similar technologies here, size and effective range being the only obvious differences," Sam continued. "If we can find a way to modify the frequency spectrum the rings use just like we did with the Dakara device to destroy the Replicators, we might be able to eradicate only the Flood and the Precursor-Wraith hybrids instead of all life in the galaxy."

"You're insane!" Sullivan said. "You seriously believe you're above Forerunner tech?" "tech _we_ have been unable to understand, despite having a lot more resources at our disposal to research them? We let you meddle with those things, and we'll be risking _millions_! You think you can play with the lives of the people in this galaxy just because you're from elsewhere?"

"That's enough, Major Sullivan," Admiral Hood said. "Please, let us do the talking."

"But, sir?"

"That's an order, soldier."

Sullivan clenched both his fists over the table, but he complied and remained quiet.

"Colonel Carter, as much as Major Sullivan _may_ be right, I, too, believe we have no other choice," Admiral Hood said. "This new enemy is indeed far more dangerous than anything we've ever known. Desperate times do require desperate measures."

"Still, sir, we can't ignore one important fact," Lasky said. "The Array is one ring short. What will happen if the Flood and the hybrids find a way to avoid the effect of the Array by hiding in that part of the galaxy where a Halo is missing?"

"Doesn't the Ark manufacture replacement Halos if one is destroyed?" Admiral Hood asked.

"It should, sir, yes. The systems in charge of that particular function aren't working, though. According to our science teams, the Foundry should be in perfectly working order, but I'm afraid they have been unable to figure out why it's not."

"Well, maybe I can help fix it," Sam said, earning her several double takes. "I mean, I'm not familiar with Furling's Forerunner tech, but perhaps with some help from your foremost experts?"

Admiral Hood and Captain Lasky looked at each other. "I'm afraid that's out of the question, Colonel."

"Why?" Sam asked.

"Because, unfortunately, our foremost expert is currently imprisoned in your brig," Lasky said.

"Oh," was Sam's reply. _Halsey._

* * *

><p>Atlantis, the Ark

0240 hrs. October 21, 2558 (Military Calendar)

The brig's door opened, and again, Blue Team walked into the room. Halsey lifted her head and acknowledged each and every one of them. Fred, Linda, Kelly and of course, John. She thought of speaking to them for a moment, but that option was thrown out of the window when

Colonel Carter walked through the threshold and stood in front of her cell, a data pad—or rather its 21st century predecessor, a tablet computer—in her right hand. She nodded to one of the guards who deactivated the cell's force field and opened it up.

"I thought you'd forgotten about me, Colonel," Halsey said. "You left in such a hurry after the Didact and the Librarian disappeared."

"We've only been gone half an hour," Sam dryly replied.

"They proved me right."

"Yes, they did."

"So all it took was the visit of two Ascended Forerunners for you to finally trust me," Halsey said smirking.

"That's not true." Sam replied. She walked into the cell until she was inches apart from Halsey. "You know? I actually was prepared to back you up if needed before you took my ship by force. You took what you needed and then escaped. You betrayed our trust, so forgive us if we still don't trust you. In fact, don't be surprised if some of us don't trust you ever again."

Halsey lowered her head. She took no pride for her previous actions. If anything, she felt ashamed, and she knew she deserved this treatment. "Does Daniel feel the same way?" she asked sadly.

Sam took a deep breath. "Actually, he's the only one who still supports you, despite everything you did to him. He's gotten himself into some trouble for defending you."

Halsey sighed in relief. That meant a whole lot more than anyone else's trust, not including her Spartans'.

"Why do you care so much about Daniel's opinion, anyway?" Sam queried.

Halsey made a show of trying to think of a response, though she already had it. "Because I owe him my life," she said. Sam shot her a double take. "If it hadn't been for him, I would've—" "I would've killed you all," she thought. But she would keep that for herself; there was really no need for Sam to know that. "All I know is that everything he told me—his words had an effect on me. They helped me realize that I was walking down a path from which there would be no coming back."

"Yep, that's Daniel," Sam said. "You should know you're not the only one who's said that. He just has that effect on people. He's easily the most caring, passionate person I've met—the type of person who would give his own life for someone he doesn't even know. His only fault is that he wants to save and help people so much, that it tears him apart when he can't make a difference."

"He certainly made a difference in me," Halsey said.

"I hope so," Sam said. "Because I need your help, and while I still can't trust you, I'm willing to trust him on this."

Halsey wasn't sure of what she'd just heard. "What did you say?" she asked unbelievably.

Sam breathed deeper than before. "I need your help," she repeated slowly.

Halsey was taken aback. "My help?"

"You are the foremost human expert in Forerunner tech, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," Halsey replied, the slightest tone of pride in her voice.

"Well, I am one of the foremost experts in alien tech back on my Earth. For better or for worse, that means we'll need to work together if we're to make this possible."

"Make what possible? What are you talking about?"

"Repurpose the Halo Array," Sam said.

Halsey was unable to hide the biggest expression of shock and disbelief she could make. "I'm sorry?"

"We've already done something similar before. The Ancients built this device which was capable of both destroying and recreating all life in our galaxy. It could be reconfigured to target specific sets of matter. We used to destroy the Replicators. Here, look." Sam handed her the tablet computer. "It's not exactly a shared vision from an Ascended being, but it'll give you an idea of what we did."

Halsey made a quick movement with her left hand to take the computer. Menacing as others may've considered this gesture, Sam didn't even flinch. The tablet's display was showing a 3D image of a large, lone mountain with some sort of sphinx carved upon its surface and a large courtyard at its base with a Stargate at its far side—a landscape of which she knew about from the Didact's description found within his record. _So this is what Dakara looked like._ She pressed a small "Play" icon at the bottom right corner of the screen, and the image began moving. The mountaintop parted and gave way to a sphere which began rising from beneath, surrounded by an energy wave. Halsey took note of the Stargate being activated just as the device discharged its wave; it was obvious that the discharge was capable of traveling through the Gate. The image zoomed out and displayed the entire planet and the atmosphere beyond being encompassed by the energy wave before it dissipated. _Interesting._

"The thing is, the basic principle of the device is the same as that of the Halo rings," Sam continued. "I believe we can recalibrate the Array to target and destroy only the Flood and the Hybrids, but I'm unfamiliar with this technology, so I'll need help from someone who's already had some experience with it, and from what I've been told, you're the one human with the most experience."

Halsey stared at the screen for a few more seconds. "That's quite an impressive thing you managed to pull off," she said without raising her eyes.

"Thanks. I'm certainâ€" "

"It doesn't mean we can do the same with the rings," Halsey interrupted.

"No, I'm actually prettyâ€" "

"You don't understand. I'm not saying it would be impossibleâ€"although it could be. What I'm saying is that we can't," Halsey emphasized, finally looking at Sam. "Tell me, what happened to this device after you used it to destroy the Replicators? Did you or anyone else ever use it again for any other purposes?"

Sam hesitated. "The Jaffa did during the Ori invasion. They attacked a human world recently converted by the Ori armies. We were there, my team and I, undercover." She paused. "The only reason why we're still alive is because the Odyssey was there as well. They beamed us out before the weapon's energy wave hit. The rest of the planet's population wasn't so lucky." Her voice became shaky for a moment as she said those last words. "The Ori later found the device and destroyed it from orbit."

"Maybe it was for the best," Halsey concluded. Both women remained silent for a full minute. "Take this from someone who just a week ago was planning to acquire some Forerunner weaponry to use against the UNSC and who had a change of heart: No single person or group of people should possess that kind of power," she finally said.

"We don't have any other choice. This is our only hope. Once the threat is overâ€" "

"Colonel, you still don't know how things work here. By now you've already heard about ONI, yes?"

"The Office of Naval Intelligence, sure. Major Sullivan is an ONI officer."

"ONI's mostly devoted to illegal, off-the-books stuff. Sullivan is one of the many lapdogs of its CIC, Admiral Serin Osman. She used to be one of my Spartans when she was a child, but her body rejected the augmentation process and was left severely crippled. She had to wash out of the program and became a protégé of Margaret Parangosky, ONI's previous CIC and an even more unscrupulous woman than me. Truth be told, Parangosky was ONI. For the most part, the reason why the war with the Covenant has kept going, despite the fact that we'd already reached a cease-fire, is because of her actions."

Halsey paused and let the irony of that sink in anew. Even if she hadn't been imprisoned after her rescue from the Forerunner Dyson sphere instead of being reinstated to her previous job in ONI, she would've never learned any of this. She came upon this information thanks to Jul 'Mdama, who was 'kind' enough to share with her his account of his capture by Osman and her black ops team. If 'Mdama were not at war with the Arbiter, he'd certainly have shared this same account with him. Loose lips sink ships. And while Jul had no lips per se, he was a loose end that neither Parangosky nor Osman had been able to fix thus far.

"Parangosky helped rehabilitate Osman, fueling her anger towards me in the process and turning it into hatred. I guess I had it coming

sooner or later," she continued, her voice trailing off as she said that last phrase. "Osman was indoctrinated to become her living, breathing image, to continue with the work she had begun and keep running ONI like she had. Sadly, I'm afraid she's done exactly that. She ordered to have me killed, not rescued, when Jul 'Mdama kidnapped me, just because she still hates me. She also hates the Covenant like most humans do, but unlike the rest of humanity, she has the resources to do something about it. Like it or not, all Covenant races are still living beings, and there is a huge difference between war casualties and genocide. I don't even want to imagine what she would do if she got her hands on a customizable Halo Array."

Halsey wasn't as surprised to hear her own words as they left her mouth as she was of the conviction she had in each and every one of them. Where was that vengeful woman who only days ago wouldn't have given a damn about the Covenant _and_ the UNSC? She'd definitely had more than a change of heart; it was also a change of soul and mind.

Sam seemed to ponder on Halsey's words for a moment. "I see your point, Doctor," she said, "and I'm actually glad you feel that way. But if we don't do this, the Precursors will still commit genocide all over this galaxy."

"I know. Which is why I am willing to help you under only one condition that you _must_ accept." Sam frowned at this statement. Halsey took a deep breath before going on. "There are still good-willed people in the UNSC, people with a conscience and a sense of morality. Lord Hood, Captain Lasky, my Spartans, and that's just for starters. Hell, I'll even give Palmer the benefit of the doubt. I'm sure they'd do the right thing no matter what if they have a few persistent voices in their ears, nudging them in the right direction, but I'm more concerned about those who might not be as easily tamed."

"What are you _exactly_ asking for?" Sam insisted.

"I'll help you repurpose the Array and destroy the Flood and the Precursors, but anything that happens afterwards will be entirely up to you. You'll be responsible for the lives of every single race here, so you'll have to ensure that they're safe, both from themselves and from _us_. That's the only way this war will endâ€”not by destroying one another, but by proving that we humans are worthy of the title the Forerunners gave us."

Halsey hoped that Sam would read that between the lines and get the message. _You'll be as guilty as I'll be if Osman uses the Array to kill some other race after we destroy the Flood._

"Wow," Sam huffed. "Daniel must've really gotten through to you."

"Yes, he did." Halsey said. _Only that it wasn't just him. The Librarian may've spoken something else to me that she didn't speak to you._ But that would be her secret between the Ascended Forerunner and her. "So, do you agree to my terms?"

* * *

><p>Atlantis conference room

****Atlantis, the Ark****

****2000 hrs. ****August 16, 2013****

"I can't believe we're still listening to that woman."

"Mitchell, calm down."

"No, seriously, sir. After all we've been through with herâ€"

"Hey, Cam, I don't like this any more than you do, but we need her. And if that's what it takes, wellâ€|"

"Sam, I'm telling you, she's got some nasty plan hidden under her sleeve, and all this is going to backfire on us sooner or later."

Daniel listened silently to this heated exchange between the rest of SG-1 up to that point. "You don't know that," he broke into the discussion.

"You're right, Daniel, I don't. Which is why I'd rather not take my chances with that woman."

Woolsey, Sheppard, McKay, and the rest of the UNSC partyâ€"sans Major Sullivan, who wasn't even told about this meeting taking placeâ€"said nothing. This discussion had been going on for almost ten minutes after Sam came back from her visit to the brig, yet none of them had dared say a word. As for Mitchellâ€| well, it was as if he'd decided to be Sullivan's voice while he was gone. It was getting overly annoying.

"Maybe we can do this without her help," Lord Hood finally voiced his opinion. "We still have lots of people who've dealt with this tech before."

"None of them with Halsey's expertise, though," Lasky muttered.

"Son, as much as I appreciate the words she used to describe us, I'm afraid we can't just let her waltz out of that cell until we know for sure that we can't do this on our own."

"I don't think we should let her out of that cell regardless," Mitchell said.

Daniel had been unable to forget Oma's words from her first visit here. After she and the Didact had appeared before the rest of these people, he'd hoped that they'd be less antagonistic towards Halsey, but the complete opposite was happening here. He knew he had to defend herâ€"and now was as good a time as any.

"Okay, that's it!" he yelled. "I'm done with all of this, and I'm not keeping my mouth shut anymore. And you know why? Because despite everything you may think of Halsey, she's come to realize something none of you have!"

"And what's _that_?" Mitchell spat.

"That this is no longer about us! And I'm not talking about the people in this room or even in this city, I'm talking about us as a whole, as a race! Catherine chose to forget her personal vendetta against the UNSC and this Osman character because she knew that there was more at stake than just her life and the lives of her Sangheili. And if that's not enough for you, just analyze the words she said to Sam. If that's still not enough evidence of a change of heart, then I don't know what it is."

"Daniel, I know you want to believe that she's changed, butâ€" Mitchel began, trying to sound calm.

"Forget about that, Mitchell!" he interrupted him, using his last name much in the same way as he'd been doing with him as of lately and hoping that would weigh heavily on him. "God, are you all really so thick that you still can't understand the simple truth behind the Didact's wordsâ€"something even Halsey's already understood? We are all the Fifth Race, and we must start acting like it! We can't let this kind of things divide us. We need to put any previous feuds and grudges behind us, and we need to work together and trust each other!"

"I'm sorry to contradict you, Doctor, but Halsey herself doesn't seem to trust us anymore than we do," Lord Hood said.

"She came back to warn us of the Precursor threat, knowing that you'd probably shoot her out of the sky the moment she arrived here," Daniel argued. "She surrendered and let us place her in a cell. She had nothing to gain and everything to lose! Do you still believe she doesn't trust us?"

Daniel was half-expecting Mitchell or someone else to give some other stupid argument against Halsey, but he was surprised when he heard Jack's statement. "Y'know? I find myself agreeing with Daniel here." Even Mitchell gave Jack a double-take. "If we can't trust each other, how can we expect to defeat these guys?" Jack went on. "Maybe we ought to give the good ol' lady a chance to earn back our trust. Wouldn't you agree, Terrence?"

Terrence? Daniel found it slightly amusing that Jack was already on a first-name basis with Lord Hood.

"Iâ€| weâ€| need to think this over, Jack," Lord Hood replied, also using Jack's first name, much to Daniel's increasing amusement. "But, yeah, maybe you're right."

Jack scanned the room, looking for someone who would still want to say otherwise, but not even Mitchell dared say another word. Everyone just nodded and started leaving the room one by one, until only Jack and Daniel were left. "Thanks for backing me up, Jack," Daniel said just as Jack was standing up.

"Hey, I told you I'd do so if you gave me solid arguments," Jack said with the slightest smile. "I guess you got lucky that a couple Ascended fellas did it for you. And they're usually not wrong, nor do they make any mistakes." He patted Daniel's shoulder as he leftâ€"and added, "Usually_._"

Daniel got the message. Oma made a catastrophic mistake by helping Anubis ascend. Let's hope she isn't wrong about Halsey as well._ He

knew she wasn't, but still, the way Jack said so without actually saying so made him uneasy. He stood there for a while longer, trying to ease and reassure himself. But it wasn't necessary; somethingâ€”or rather, someoneâ€”did that for him. He felt suddenly calm and confident of what he'd done.

And he knew exactly who'd given him that comfort.

* * *

><p>Stargate Operations

Atlantis, the Ark

0705 hrs. October 21, 2558 (Military Calendar)

"Atlantis, this is Carter. Come in."

"Hey, Carter, how's that little field trip going?" General O'Neill said. Everyone else gathered around the screen in front of him, watching at the video feed from one of the Spartan-II's helmet.

"Sir, you should really see this place! It's amazing! I've never seen anything like it."

"I'm sure it is," O'Neill replied with a smirk. "Anything interesting?"

"Not yet, but this Citadel is pretty big. Aside from the control room, there's a few more levels below the surface, and we're still at the first of those, checking every available terminal to make sure that we don't overlook anything. Well, Dr. Halsey is, anyway."

Woolsey, O'Neill, and Lord Hood had finally agreed to let Halsey out of the brig. Now, she, Colonel Carter, and Blue Teamâ€”and three additional Spartan-IV fireteams, just to be certainâ€”were making their way inside the Citadel, where Lasky had already established a research base two weeks ago. "Colonel, I don't mean to discourage you, but our people have already tried to do that to no avail," he said over the radio.

"That's what Dr. Owen said when we got here. Then again, she missed this."

Lasky saw as Halsey fiddled with one of the Forerunner holographic panels. Suddenly, the floor beneath himâ€”the entire Ancient city, in factâ€”began shaking. Just a moment later, the quake stopped. "What did you just do?"

"Relax, Captain. I just reactivated the Foundry. It was no big deal, really. You said your people believed that the Ark had been repaired after Johnâ€”excuse me, Sierra-117â€”fired the replacement Halo?"

"Yeah. Why?"

_"Apparently, the Foundry proper uses massive amounts of power, so it had to be deactivated while the Ark fixed itself. I still don't

understand why it would require confirmation to start working again, but that doesn't matter right now."_

"Halsey's right," Carter said. _"We should focus on finding out whether we can pull this off, and for the moment we've solved our first problem, soâ€¦|"_

"Alright, we'll leave you to it," O'Neill said. "Don't forget to bring me a nice souvenir."

"Will do, sir. Carter out."

Colonel Carter nodded to the Spartan behind her, and the transmission was terminated. Lasky moved away from the screen and walked towards the door leading to the balcony, thinking how funny enough it was that the Ark's day/night cycle seemed to be more in tune with these people's timetable, which meant it was already night here. Once outside, he had a clear view of the night sky, the Milky Way and many other galaxies beyond the Ark. Then he looked at the cliffs and the three shield-generating towers overlooking the Citadelâ€”and the pink clouds beyond, reflecting the glow of the Foundry's core.

He knew those were millions of Strato-Sentinels, Forerunner machines designed to mine the resources from said planetoid and use them to build new Halos. Except that they had been completely idle until now. He remembered how the core looked like when he first arrived. The planetoid at the Ark's center was smaller and had more strip-mined regions than it had five years ago when the Master Chief and the Arbiter went through the Voi portal to stop Truth from firing the rings, based on imagery taken during the battle. He could only guess how much raw materials were needed to repair this Installation, and yet, there was easily still more than enough left to build the entire Array anew.

Lasky took in the view once more before stepping back inside, intent on returning to his assigned quarters. Aside from Stargate Operations, Atlantis' hallways and main workstations were all but deserted, since most people had already turned in. He was thinking of doing the same; after all, this whole Halsey situation had robbed him already of a couple hours of sleep. But just a few meters from the nearest transporter, he heard two people arguing among themselves in a low, almost whispered voice. Lasky would've probably ignored them, had he not paid close attention to the exchange.

"Colonel, all I ask of you is that you take me back to Earth." That was Sully. "Admiral Osman needs to know about all this. She's the only one who can set things right. You don't even have to be with me when I give her my report."

"Then why do you need me at all? You've already told me that you have a ship."

"Yes, one of _Infinity_'s complementary frigates. According to Roland, the Huragok have finally managed to repair whatever problem the was with the underbelly bulkhead doors, so they're now free to depart, but even at top speed it'll take me days to get back in one of them. Your ship, thoughâ€¦|"

Lasky walked towards the corner and peeked into the hallway to see Sully and Colonel Mitchell standing at another corner at its far

side. Mitchell was obviously uneasy with this conversation, as he kept looking to his right, then past him, then to his right again. Lasky wasn't sure if he'd seen him, but he still hid again behind the corner as quickly as possible. He stayed there, though, waiting to hear something else. He remembered how Mitchell had been acting a lot like Sully during their last meeting, and he wouldn't have been surprised to hear him agree with Sully.

"Look," Mitchell said, also in a whispered voice, after several stressful minutes. "I don't like this anymore than you do, but we were both there when those Ascended Furlingsâ€”"

"Forerunners."

"Whatever. We were both there when they told us that we could trust Halsey, and I don't know about you, but despite my gut feeling, I'm willing to give her a chance." Lasky heard Sully trying to object, but Mitchell wouldn't let him. "Besides, I already have my orders, and I can't go AWOL just because you asked nicely. So why don't we pretend we never had this conversation?"

Lasky heard nothing else for a while. He wondered whether they had both just left, but when he was about to take another peek, he heard Sully's voice. It carried a menacing tone which made him shiver. "You're messing with the wrong people, _Colonel_."

Then, Lasky finally heard someone walking away. He took it as his cue to leave, and he moved as quietly as possible towards the transporter. By the time he reached his quarters, a terrible thought was plaguing him.

Had Halsey been right to hate the UNSC all along? And where did that leave him?

He drifted away with this unanswered questions in his mind and slept until well past midday, Atlantis Time. By then, Sully was already gone.

* * *

><p>Location: CLASSIFIED

UNSC _Point of No Return_

1300 hrs. October 31, 2558 (Military Calendar)

_ "â€|and not only do we have now the ability to build yet another replacement Halo ring, but thanks to Colonel's Carter skillful meddling, we may also be able to use the Foundry to build many more things that we need." _

_ "Preliminary simulations show promise, actually. We're considering testing our theory by having the Foundry build new engines for _Infinity_â€”hybrid engines which will incorporate both Forerunner and Asgard tech. Of course, we still need to design them, so it could be a while before that." _

_ "Regardless, we may have to wait to perform any such tests until the fabrication process for the replacement Halo ring is on its latest

stages. However, I might be able to speed up the process by rerouting some power from any nonessential systems to the Foundry."_

"We'll keep you posted, sirs. Carter out."

Serin Osman finished listening to this audio recording for the third time with her eyes closed. Sullivan was standing opposite of the round conference table. "Well thought of you to remain behind until you did to gather more intel, Sullivan," she told him, her eyes still shut.

"Thank you, Admiral. What will you have me do now?"

Osman didn't reply right away. She thought of all the considerations, all the ramifications of her next decision as fast as she could. Maybe she didn't have the processing abilities of an AI, but she _did_ have those of a Spartan, which was close enough. "Just keep an eye on them for now," she replied eventually.

"Admiral?" Sullivan said, his shock poorly hidden behind his voice.

"We'll let them continue with this little project of theirs," she said. "Something good may come out of it eventually."

"Butâ€" "

"You're dismissed, Major."

Osman heard the door hiss open as Sullivan left. Even the rhythm of his footsteps told her that he wasn't too happy with her decision, but he probably knew better than to question it any further. Thus was the legacy her predecessor had left for her.

The door was sealed shut again, and Osman was left alone inside Odin's Eye, the safest conference room in all the galaxy. And _then_ she finally opened her eyes.

"You sure you want to let Halsey around this kind of tech?"

Well, maybe not so alone. "I don't like it any more than you do, BB," Osman told Black Box, her faithful AI companion, as his avatar became visible in front of her. "But we can't ignore the fact that we _do_ need new tech, and if these people are so recklessly willing to use the Ark's Foundry to fabricate it for us, who are we to deny them such a privilege?"

"Stillâ€|" BB didn't finish that phrase. His voice trailed off, and his plain, box-shaped avatar blinked red a couple of times.

Osman tried not to show any concern on the outside, but on the inside, she was terribly worried. BB was near the end of his 7-year lifespan, and he'd been showing the first symptoms of rampancy for some time now. How could it be that after all these years and after all they'd been together with Kilo-Five, the first casualty of the team wouldn't even be a human but an _AI_? Yes, she'd grown attached to a piece of equipment. _But BB's more than just that. A whole lot more. And I'm not letting him die if I have a say in it._

She'd read Sullivan's previous report. Most of it was quite interesting, but there'd only been one thing that'd made her pause and go back, more than once as a matter of fact: something about Halsey building some sort of nanotechnology-based artificial construct for as of yet unknown purposes. Osman knew it was a long shot, but the details on these 'Replicator' constructs made her believe that they were the key to prevent and maybe even fix AI rampancy.

And that was just for starters. She was hoping that these people would start sharing their technology by installing and testing it onboard _Infinity_. Then, with any luck, the UNSC would be able to duplicate any said upgrades, and humanity would never again have to worry about insurrectionists or the Covenant. Of course, if Halsey and this Colonel Carter managed to modify the Array and tune it at will, it would be a nice bonus. Osman didn't really want to consider using it on an entire species—as she preferred to have them fight and kill each other—but an airtight insurance policy, as a certain Sergeant Major used to say, was always welcome.

"Don't worry, BB. This will be all over before you know it. I'm CINCONI, remember? I have everything under control."

* * *

><p>AN: So, what do you think? Please review and let me know your opinion.
>

Now, I'd like to consult with you all on a small problem I've got. As I told you last time, I've been trying to write this story in such a way that it may fit within the already established canon, and I believe I've succeeded so far. I just finished reading Issue #3 of _Halo: Escalation_, and it was good to see that I wouldn't have to worry about that for the moment. I just hope things keep going on like that, 'cause to tell you the truth, I got incredibly lucky to get Chapter 1 to fit into what Issue #1 of the aforementioned comic book series established months _after_ I published this fic.

Anyway, I'm now at a crossroads because now that **it's ****official that the _Spirit of Fire_ will be heavily featured in the next three issues of _Halo: Escalation_, I'd love to have it appear in TFRR at least in some sort of cameo or something like that. Of course, that'd mean I'd have to wait a month at best, or three at most, to keep going on with this fic, and I really don't want to keep it on hold that long 'cause (as you've just read) things are just about to get really interesting. So, what should I do? Should I ****take my risks and keep going on with ****this story**** _and_ still deliver a mind-blowing finale****, or should I ****wait until all issues of _Halo: Escalation_ have been released and maybe even improve ****it****?*

Just like I did last time when I was wondering whether to write a crossover SGU Season 3 or not, I'm going to create a poll on this matter. Said poll will appear on my FanFiction profile page and **my TFRR Facebook page; there, you'll be able to submit your vote (**BTW**, my other poll is still open, and it'll remain that way until I'm done with TFRR, in case you still want to vote on that one)****, but unlike the last time, I'm placing a real deadline on

this one****. Issue #4 is due March 26, and b**y then, I hope to know if it'd be worth waiting or not, anyway**, so that's going to be my deadline (my working title for the next chapter is "A Month Later"; how about that for irony?).
>

I'm also open to all kinds of suggestions via reviews and my TFRR Facebook page as well, so don't forget to review/comment on your way out!

**And thank you all again! You people keep this fic going! YOU'RE AWESOME!
>

18. Chapter 18: A Month Later

A/N: So, it's not exactly a mon**th later, but it's close enough. Better now than later, anyway. Enjoy!**

* * *

><p>In hyperspace, en route to the Ark

USS _Daedalus_

1800 hrs. October 3, 2013

"So, do you think Todd was pleased to see us, Sheppard?" Caldwell asked.

Sheppard snorted. "Seriously? All those needles Keller had to poke him with? I'm sure he enjoyed it," he replied sarcastically.

"We told him what had happened to the rest of his kind. We had to be sure that it wouldn't happen to him and his people," Dr. Jennifer Keller countered behind him.

Daedalus was just returning from its small visit to Pegasusâ€"specifically, to Todd's new homeworld. Standing on the bridge and watching the endless tunnel of blue-white light that was hyperspace through the viewport, Sheppard's mind drifted a few years back in time. Since the establishment of the currently abandoned Pegasus Forward Base, the SGC had been working closely together with him and his Wraith to refine Keller's gene therapy. At first, Todd had been somewhat reluctant, given that the first attempt to do it had failed; then again, said failure was his own fault, as he had performed it with incomplete dataâ€"data stolen from _Daedalus_' data banks, so he ended up both admitting his fault and agreeing to let Keller do her thing. In the end, her work had borne fruit; even to this day, Todd and his followers no longer fed on humans.

"Was that our call, anyway?" Caldwell said, bringing Sheppard back to the present.

"He did look concerned about losing hisâ€| personality, just like the rest of the Wraith did when the Flood infected them," Keller said.

"Lucky him," Sheppard said. "He's stillâ€| he only because he was

smart enough to submit himself to the treatment once we refined it four years agoâ€”"

"Don't forget the other three Hives he managed to convince to do the same," Keller remarked.

"Yeah, those too. Had it not been because of that, he would've had no other choice but to follow his brethren to their homeworld."

"And he would've ended up just like them," Caldwell concluded. "Still, they no longer have a Queen, and with all of them gone, I actually thought he'd choose to join them now."

"He's not willing to admit that he belongs to a dying race yet," Sheppard said.

"He just might be," Caldwell muttered, sounding almost pleased about it. Sheppard himself would've loved the idea of a galaxy finally without Wraith a month ago, but nowâ€”

Just knowing that humanity was meant to become a race that would look after _all_ sentient lifeâ€”and that, unfortunately, included the Wraithâ€”gave him a whole new perspective about lots of things. Maybe the Wraith were never meant to beâ€”the Precursors never intended for them to exist, after all. They were only meant to be vessels for the Precursor essences contained within the Iratus bugs' DNA; the resulting race was nothing short of an accident. Still, they were no less sentient than any other race out there, which meant they were 'sheltered under the Mantle of Responsibility'â€”as Daniel had become fond of sayingâ€”as well. Besides, up to this day, there were still many things about the Wraith that humanity did not know, as Todd himself had once said.

At least it was Todd they were dealing with. It made it less uncomfortable for Sheppard, even if he still felt like he was walking around with a live grenade in his pocket every time he was close to the old, tricky Wraith.

The bright light given off by the subspace tunnel _Daedalus_ was traveling through gave way to the endless star-littered void and the massive starfish-shaped Ark belowâ€”and the gigantic ring undergoing its final stage of construction floating just above its core. That was the new Installation 04. A Halo.

True to her word and alleged skills, Halsey had managed to speed up the ring's construction process. Where it normally would've taken it about three months from starting to build the framework to finish applying the last touches of paint, it had only taken it six weeks to reach its current stage. And while several sections of the ring were still glowing red with molten metal, even now some of them were starting to cool down as large numbers of Strato-Sentinels filled in the blanks of the ring's outer surface.

Within seconds of their arrival, the radio crackled. "_Daedalus_, this is Atlantis. Welcome back."

"Thank you, Chuck," Sheppard replied, recognizing the voice at the other end of the link. "Any word from _Infinity_?"

"They arrived five minutes ago."

"No kidding?"

"No, sir. Captain Lasky's already down here. He told me to give you a message once you arrived. It reads, 'I won. When do I collect?'"

"Damn," Sheppard said, scanning the space above the Ark in search of the UNSC's biggest ship. He finally found it at the top-right corner of the viewport, parked in orbit about a hundred kilometers away. "Roger that. I'll pay him once I beam down."

"You'd better hurry up, sir. They're all just waiting for you in the conference room."

"Be right there, Chuck. Daedalus out."

The link went silent. Keller walked up to Sheppard's side and glanced at him, curiosity etched in her eyes. "What was that all about?"

Sheppard didn't reply, but his smirk spoke volumes. Caldwell noticed it. "Hold on a second. Is that why you were in such a hurry to leave" because of a bet with Captain Lasky?"

Again, Sheppard said nothing. He just stared outside the viewport. Even from this far away, Infinity looked magnificent now that it was repaired and its new engines filled the gaping wound left over by Halsey's attack nearly two months ago. How ironic, Sheppard thought, that the same woman who had crippled the warship would later work hand in hand with Carter to fix it.

Yes, he had made a bet with Lasky just a couple of days before the departure of both ships. Fifty bucks say you won't beat us back here, Sheppard had said, staring at the Huragok as they finished installing Carter's new hybrid drive and engines. Lasky immediately warmed up to the idea and accepted the challenge without hesitation. It would be the perfect opportunity to test this latest addition.

According to Carter, Infinity's fusion reactor would provide enough raw power to allow it to travel through hyperspace as fast as any BC-304 not equipped with a ZPM would; that, of course, meant that Daedalus would be able to beat Infinity in a race effortlessly. What Sheppard didn't consider, however, was that Keller would be so thorough with her analyses. Perhaps this was better for Lasky, seeing as how humanity in this galaxy didn't use paper money anymore. He would've had a hard time trying to find a way to pay Sheppard.

When it became obvious to Caldwell that Sheppard wouldn't squawk, he nodded to the officer at his right. Sheppard felt the tingling of the Asgard beam transport shredding his body in millions of base molecules. Just before the light engulfed him and Keller completely, he simply said, "See ya, Colonel."

A few moments later, he found himself in front of Atlantis' Gate room. Lasky and McKay were waiting for them. Keller smiled and kissed her fianc  in the cheek, and they both headed to the conference room. Sheppard still couldn't believe that Rodney and Jennifer were

finally engaged after all these years, but even if it was a bit odd for him, he felt happy for them.

Lasky spared the couple a glance as they walked up the stairs before offering his hand to Sheppard. "Colonel, good to see you," he said, smiling.

"You too, Captain," Sheppard replied, shaking Lasky's hand and understanding the meaning behind the smug grin in his face. He pulled a few dollars from his pocket and handed them to him. "How's she run?"

"Not as fast as your ships, but it's still a very big improvement," Lasky said, accepting the banknotes and looking at them as if they were the last samples of paper money in the world before sliding them into his own pocket. Sheppard was aware, of course, that all of the UEG's monetary transactions were made electronically and thus physical money no longer existed in this galaxy, but it was still slightly amusing to see Lasky behave like a curious kid.

"Well, yeah," Sheppard said. He paused for a moment. "Things okay back on Earth?"

The expression on Lasky's face sobered. "Better than in other worlds, I'm afraid."

"I take it the news are not good."

Lasky shook his head. "Some of the outer colonies that survived the war with the Covenant have fallen to the Precursors. The Arbiter reports the same of some of his allies' and most of his enemies' worlds." He seemed to be reckoning a terrible possibility. "If they're doing with those worlds the same thing they did with Hesdurosâ€"

"â€"their fleets will soon be too much for anyone to handle," Sheppard completed the idea. He'd been thinking about that possibility for a whileâ€"and he didn't like it one bit. When the Atlantis expedition first arrived at Pegasus and awakened the Wraith, there were about sixty Hive ships out there. Back then, Sheppard had believed that to be a fearsome amount of Wraith ships, and they weren't even equipped with shields and better weapons like Precursors Hive were. He could only imagine what a larger number of these new Hives couldâ€"and _would_â€"do. "We need to make our move fast. How long 'til the ring is complete?"

"It should be a matter of a couple more days, butâ€|" Lasky hesitated.

"What?"

"Carter's going to give us the details during the meeting," Lasky said, trying to find the proper words. "Apparently, there's a problem that needs sorting out first."

Sheppard sighed. _There's always something._ "It's no big deal, right?"

Lasky shrugged and gestured towards the conference room as if saying, _'How should I know? Ask her.'_ And he would. They were still waiting

for him to begin the briefing, after all. He nodded at Lasky, and they both walked upstairs.

* * *

><p>Atlantis conference room

Atlantis, the Ark

1810 hrs. October 3, 2013

Sam looked up from the screen of her tablet computer as she caught a glimpse of Sheppard and Lasky stepping into the room. "Hey, John," she greeted him with a smile. "How's Todd doing?"

"He's still kicking," Sheppard replied with a small grin. He sat across from her, with Lasky sitting at his right. "I hear you've run unto a small snag?"

"Wish it were small," Sam replied, surveying the room once more. Halsey was still working at the Citadel, and Sam had already briefed Lord Hood, Jack, and Woolsey about the same matter she was about to discuss with Sheppard and Lasky, so it was only them, McKay, and Keller in the room with her. "You've read all of the mission reports about the Dakara device?"

"Yeah."

"Then you know we had to determine how Replicator individual cells were bonded together in order to configure the device's frequency spectrum to target them and sever that bond." Both Sheppard and Lasky nodded, the latter a bit more slowly as he apparently tried to understand what she'd just said. "I was hoping we'd be able to do the same with existing Flood samples from the Halos, but Halsey and I just realized that there might be a chance that the Precursors will be immune to the FQ setting used to target Flood cells. See, that was the original problem and the reason why the Array had to be tuned to target all sentient life" because the Forerunners were unable to determine exactly which molecular chains were unique to all Flood forms. In our case, we would also require to determine"

"Ok, just hold on a second," Sheppard interrupted her. Lasky had a blank stare, and she realized that she'd gotten carried away as usual. "Are you telling us that we've spent over a month working on a plan that will not work?"

Sam shook her head. "What I'm saying is that we need to complete the work the Forerunners began millennia ago. They were close, really close. They just ran out of time before they could find a safe way to collect enough samples for study. Our plan will work, if we get the samples we need. And we need a lot."

Sheppard frowned before widening his eyes in dreadful realization. "Oh, you're not suggesting what I think you are suggesting."

"We need to get inside one of those Precursor ships," she said.

"Oh, well. You had me worried for a moment there. I thought we'd need to sneak into a Precursor-controlled planet to get you those samples," Sheppard replied sarcastically; then he continued with a

more serious tone. "Sam, you do remember we went through a lot of trouble to destroy that cruiser on M9R-748, don't you?" Sam nodded and opened her mouth to speak, but Sheppard wouldn't let her. "According to our most reliable intel, the Precursors are no longer even growing cruisers anymore, so we're talking about a Hive ship. A Hive full of Precursors _and_ Flood. That's where you want us to break into? It's suicide!"

"Our Spartans could do it," Lasky said confidently.

"Captain, no offense, but your Spartans don't have the expertise to board a Hive ship," Sheppard countered. "I don't doubt they'd be able to pull something like that offâ€"maybeâ€"but they'd still need our help to get in and out of there faster, and unfortunately, we're not immune to the Flood and we don't have anything that could help us survive within such an environment."

"I knew you'd say something like that," McKay said. "Here, check this out." He slid a small wristwatch-like device across the table to Sheppard.

"What's this, McKay?" he said, picking it up and turning it this way and that.

McKay smirked. "Remember this one?" he said, pulling a Lantean personal shield emitter out of his pocket and holding it in his hand for all to see. "I've been working on a new modelâ€"one that won't require you to have the Ancient gene to use it. You're looking at my first, fully functional prototype," he concluded proudly.

Sheppard strapped the device around his wrist and pressed the small button on its side. True enough, a shield immediately encompassed him. He pressed the button againâ€"the shield allowing his finger access to the deviceâ€"and it disappeared. He raised an eyebrow. "What's the catch?"

Sam lowered her head and bit her lip to suppress a grin. He knew Rodney McKay all too well. She looked up again to see Rodney fidget a bit.

"T-that's the only one I've been able to make," he said. Sheppard narrowed his eyes at him. "I had to use _Odyssey_'s Asgard core to fabricate it, and it took a bit of power," he finished with a low voice.

"Let out Huragok have a look at it," Lasky said. "Maybe they can produce a few more units."

All of a sudden, McKay was back to his arrogant self. "Well, the science of it is incredibly complex," he said, crossing his arms. "I don't know if they'll be able toâ€""

"Dr. McKay, Huragok can learn how something works just by analyzing it with their tentacles, and they can fabricate virtually anything from scratch, using any materials available."

"He knows, Captain," Sheppard said. "He's just jealous of them."

"Jealous?" Rodney parroted.

"McKay, it took you almost ten years to crack that personal shield, and you know they'd be able to understand that device of yours in five minutes. They'd probably even be able to improve your prototype."

"That's not our only problem," Sam said, breaking off the discussion between them before it even began. "It's possible that the Precursors have already modified the command interface we're familiar with, so you'll need a way to hack into their systems in order to disable the ship, which will probably require prolonged direct exposure to Flood environment. Under those circumstances, there's no guarantee that you'll be completely immune to the Flood, even protected by that personal shield. One spore breaking through it is all it would take for you to get infected."

"Why would we need to disable the Hive?" Sheppard asked.

"To give our ships a break," Sam replied. "There's no reason to believe that we won't be facing a fleet of Hives, so that would be one Hive less to worry about while we keep the rest at bay."

"Right," Sheppard said, trying to act like he'd always known that. "So, how're we gonna disable the Hive if we can't risk exposing ourselves?"

"That's kind of the reason why I called you here," Sam said a bit hesitantly. "Halsey's provided a solution, but she's kind of thrown us a curb ball. I thought you should know."

Sheppard raised an eyebrow. "What kind of curb ball are we talking about?"

Sam took the remote in front of her and aimed it at the screen to her right. The Atlantis Expedition logo was replaced by a live feed of one of the city's labs where a woman with short, black hair was moving from one computer screen to another, not really doing anything besides staring at the information they displayed. Sheppard then seemed to notice the woman's outfit, and his reaction mirrored Sam's own slight concern.

* * *

><p>Atlantis, the Ark

0117 hrs. December 7, 2558 (Military Calendar)

And here I thought things couldn't get any weirder. Never in my life did I imagine that I'd be on the other end of a camera lens.

Cortana scoffed to herself as she kept scanning every last piece of intel displayed by the lab's computer screens, recording the information within her data banks. She used to be the one monitoring people and places by means of cameras and sensors when she was a simple AI, not the one being monitored. Not that she couldn't try and do it now; all she had to do was to touch one of the computers, and her nanites would immediately link her with the city's mainframe. But she wouldn't do it. She had promised not to do it.

She had spent the last seven weeks working on Luminous Truth, surrounded by Elites, effecting repairs and updating most of the tech onboard. This physical form had its advantages, even if Dr. McKay had implemented several restrictions within her nanites' base code. She couldn't replicate or communicate with other Replicatorsâ€”the latter, Cortana thought, was nothing short of an exaggeration, since every last Replicator had long since been destroyedâ€”but she could at least change her own appearance at will. She had noticed that some of the men in the city, including Dr. McKay, kept staring at her skinsuit that resembled her former AI 'look' in a way that she found uncomfortable, so she'd decided to change her 'clothes' and sport a more Asuran-looking attire.

She could also manipulate matter on a microscopic level almost as if she were a Huragok, which meant she could modify a lot of stuff, such as the cruiser's shield emitters and Slipspace drive. She chuckled at this thought. In reality, she'd done more than just fix the drive and the shields. Luminous Truth was no longer equipped with a Slipspace drive but with an Asgard hyperdrive. The shields were now of Asgard design as well, and they could be converted into an efficient cloak, way better than the active camo found in some Covenant ships. Halsey had requested of her to do all this before going to Hesduros so that she and her crew would have a higher tactical advantage against the fleet guarding the planet. Except that when they got there, it wasn't a Covenant fleet what they'd found but what she now knew was a Precursor fleet.

Halsey had surprised her when she'd decided to return to the Ark to warn the UNSC about this threat. Within the first three days of her comeback, Cortana had both learned everything that had happened to her creator and figured out what her current intentions were. Going back was not something she'd expected her to do, and even then, she'd decided to keep Cortana's existence a secret. Until now.

Needless to say, now that they knew about her, there were things that were best left unsaidâ€”such as the overhaul done to Luminous Truth. Halsey had obviously managed to earn back the trust of this peopleâ€”somewhat; there was no need to give them any reason to doubt her again. Both Halsey and Cortana only confirmed this when Dr. McKayâ€”the very same man who had built her bodyâ€”had to prove to this Colonel Carter that she represented no security risk at all by having her undergo several tests and scans. Even then, they wouldn't allow her to touch anything in the city, hence the reason why she could only stare at all these screens instead of downloading all the data at once. It bothered her, of course, but if that's what it took for these guys to trust herâ€”

A series of loud, heavy footsteps alerted her of a Spartan walking towards the lab. She turned to look at the doorway when the footsteps stopped and confirmed her guess. The Braille markings in his armor read '117'. She smiled.

"You got my message," she said, recalling the unsigned message she'd left for him two days ago at the front desk, so to speak. She'd asked a guy named Chuck to give it to him in person once Infinity returned from Earth.

The Chief remained silent for a while, but Cortana noticed that he didn't look as stoic as usual. "Youâ€” you areâ€” you areâ€”" he

finally said, his voice weak and shaky, something quite unusual in him.

"Human?" she suggested. "Not quite. I do look good, though, if I mayâ€"

"You're alive," the Chief said, a mixture of relief and utter shock in his voice. "You are really alive. H-how?"

"That was the Librarian," Cortana shrugged. "Her Requiem AI version, anyway. She kept me safe inside of a Forerunner device that ended up in Halsey's hands a few months ago while she was on Requiem."

"But you didn't stay behind there. You came with me. You were with me. How did youâ€"

"Get there?" Cortana said, gazing at him in wonder. Somehow, this didn't sound like the Master Chief she'd known for so long. "Remember that battle over Earth when we stopped the Didact?"

"There's not a day that goes by when I don't think back to that battle," the Chief said sorrowfully, nodding slightly.

Cortana blinked. This definitely was not the Chief she knew. She began wondering what it could be that had changed him so much in only one year. "Then you remember that Slipspace event that was building up under the Composer," she continued eventually. The Chief nodded again. "It was linked to Requiem. That's how I got back there, along with all of the composed humans from New Phoenix." She recalled the memories that surfaced when her system was rebooted and shivered; that trip had been quite disturbing. "The next thing I remember is waking up like thisâ€"like a Replicator. Quite a misnomer, considering that I cannot actually replicate. And, here I am."

The Chief didn't move, didn't speak, didn't as much as flex a finger for almost ten minutes. It made Cortana feel awkward, something that had never happened before. She was used to his silenceâ€"it never bothered her. So why was she expecting him to say anything at all? Why had she expected him to say anything when she saved him a year ago? What was happening to her?

Maybe the Chief wasn't the only one who had changed. AIs were not oblivious to human emotions within their own code, but they always managed to keep them subdued and remain objective at all times. Rampancy, however, tended to bring those emotions to the surface. She had experienced it, perhaps like no other human AI ever had. And now, there were these feelings she couldn't explain towards the Chief. They had been there for a while now.

Before this is all overâ€|

Those words rang softly in her ears. She'd made him promiseâ€|

"Cortana, Iâ€|" the Chief said suddenly. "Iâ€"

"You don't need to tell me, Chief," Cortana said, cutting him off. Somehow, she was beginning to understand.

"No, I do need to tell you," he insisted, but then he hesitated.

"But I don't know how to do it. I can't find the words. I couldn't find them before, and I still can't do it now."

Cortana sighed. "Just tell me. Did you figure it out? Did you find out which one of us was the machine?"

He lowered his head and said with a gravelly voice, "I did."

"I didn't mean to offend you with that. I just wanted you to realize what it meant to be human. You fought so long for humanity, and I was afraid that you might've forgotten what it was like to be humanâ€¦ to take a moment to appreciate those things we take for grantedâ€¦ to feelâ€¦" The words coming out of her mouth were meant for him, but they hit her as well. She'd tried to deny her own feelings, but she couldn't do it anymore. She was as human as the next person in this base. She had the right to feel.

"I've tried," the Chief said. His voice was less and less strong with each sentence. Cortana wished she could see the face behind that helmet, if only to be able to read him better. "I've tried to be something more, but this is what I've always known. I don't know how to be something else. I don't know if I can be something else."

"You can," she reassured him. "I know you can."

He looked up again towards her. She wondered if he was making eye contact with her from behind that faceplate or just looking past her. "When I lost youâ€¦ I felt a deep pain inside of me." He paused again. Those words took her by surprise. "You've been my only friend. You've beenâ€¦" His shaky voice trailed off, and he looked down again. And that's when it hit her. He was also conflicted. He might not know what he was feeling himself.

"Chief?" Cortana said, walking up to him. He didn't reply. "John?" She placed her hand beneath his chin and lifted his head. She needed to say this, to do this. "You know, there are things which cannot be expressed with mere words," she continued as she carefully removed his helmet, revealing his deep gaze. She brought her face closer and whispered, "Sometimes, you need to express them in another way."

* * *

><p>Atlantis conference room

Atlantis, the Ark

2200 hrs. December 7, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Sheppard glared at Cortana for the umpteenth time. McKay noticed it. "Relax, Sheppard. She's okay. She's just like Fran," he said.

"Fran made me just as uneasy," Sheppard countered.

"Well, thank you for the vote of confidence," McKay replied, sounding quite upset.

Sheppard shook his head and looked at Sam. "Does she have to be here?"

"She's vital to our plan. She has a right to be here," Sam told him. "Besides, McKay's right. Cortana cannot replicate."

"I wouldn't replicate, Colonel," Cortana corrected.

Halsey watched the exchange in silence. Sheppard obviously didn't like Replicators one bit, that much was obvious. It made her wonder what kind of a pain in the ass they had been and question her decision to force McKay to build one for her, if only for a brief moment. But when she glanced at Cortana, she decided that she regretted nothing. She'd given her AI a well-deserved second chance, and now it seemed like her involvement in this mission could, once more, turn out to be the key to winning this new war.

She took a moment to scan the room. Virtually everyone was here—Hood, O'Neill, Woolsey, Lasky, Carter, Mitchell, Caldwell, Sheppard, McKay. The big guy with dreadlocks who she now knew was called Ronon. Her Spartans, of course. And Daniel. Hell, even Palmer who had returned to active duty after a month of therapy and getting used to her new prosthetic arm. The latter kept staring at her, not with hate as much as with distrust. Halsey couldn't blame her, not anymore. But the prosthesis actually looked good on Palmer. It reminded her of that Spartan from Noble Team—Kat, wasn't it?

Sullivan was also in the room. After a few weeks of work and somewhat earning back Sam's trust, she had told Halsey about everything he'd said about her and how he'd desperately tried to convince everyone not to trust her. She couldn't blame him, either, but she was still wary of him more than anyone else. He was still ONI, after all. At least he was behaving now, though she wasn't entirely sure if it was because he had decided it was best for him or because he had been ordered to—and in the latter case, she had no way of knowing exactly who had ordered it nor why.

She pushed that thought aside as she took another look around her. This was the first time she'd ever been in this particular place in the city. The last time, she'd beamed down at the Gate room and been taken straight to the dungeons. Then, after the Ascended Furlings' visit, she'd been released and taken directly to a Pelican that was waiting for her and Sam—and the Spartans that had orders to keep an eye on her. Ever since then, she'd been cooped up inside the Ark's Citadel, working and learning everything she could about its systems so that she'd find a way to make it build the Halo faster. And she had. Maybe now that Installation 04's construction was on its last stages and she no longer needed to supervise it, she'd have the time to take a tour all over Atlantis. One thing was for sure: Forerunner buildings and artificial installations were magnificently breathtaking because of their size, but the Ancients had even more style than the Forerunners when it came to engineering.

"Alright," Sheppard finally relented, letting out a sigh. "So, the plan is to board a Hive ship. How are we going to do that?"

"Cortana is still trying to extrapolate the location of the Precursors' next attack, based on the intel we've gathered so far about the worlds they've invaded," Sam said. "When she does, we'll send Infinity, Daedalus, and Hammond to intercept them before they can lay a finger on that planet. Now, we must assume that Precursor Hive ships have been upgraded with shields and a reinforced

hull just like their cruisers, and that their strength will be exponentially bigger. So, we believe the best course of action once we pick a Hive out of the rest of the fleet will be to have Daedalus and Hammond attack it using a hit-and-run approachâ€”moving in and out of hyperspaceâ€”while Infinity provides cover fire from a distance."

Lasky's eyes grew big with concern. "If their weapons are anything remotely similar to your plasma weaponry, we won't have a snowball's chance in hell of surviving for long."

Sam cringed. "Their weapons are different, but they may've been upgraded too, and if their power-generating capabilities have been improvedâ€”and we believe they have beenâ€”then their weapons fire will also be stronger." She paused for a moment and looked briefly at O'Neill. "That's why we will provide your Huragok with the specs of our Asgard shields and plasma weapons."

Halsey could've sworn that everyone in the room had suddenly stopped breathing. Even she knew what it meant for the SGC to give away such upgrades to anyone. Lasky blinked twice before asking bemusedly, "For real?"

"Carter?" O'Neill said slowly. Apparently, she hadn't consulted with him beforehand. But before Sam could explain, Daniel intervened.

"Jack, the legacy the Asgard entrusted us with was meant for the entire Fifth Race, not only for us. I believe we can entrust Captain Lasky with it, too." Halsey took note of the emphasis Daniel made to Lasky's name. So, they were keeping up their promise to her.

"Regardless, sir," Sam continued, "their having it will be critical for the success of this mission. Hopefully, this strategy will allow us to bring the Hive's shields down in less than five minutes, at which point our assault teams will blast their way inside."

"Wait," Palmer said, frowning. "We won't beam our people inside the ship?"

"Wraith ships used to have a jamming system that prevented transportation by such means, so it is fair to assume that these new Hives have kept those countermeasures," McKay explained.

"The moment those shields are down, I'll take Hammond close enough to allow for two Jumpers to move in cloaked and board the ship," Sam said before Palmer even had a chance to ask. "We'll blow the Dart Bay doors and provide cover fire with our railguns until the Jumpers are inside. Then, we'll jump away to a safer distance."

Sheppard crossed his arms and leaned back on his chair, a slight smirk appearing on his face. "Who will be going with us on this little field trip?"

"You will fly the first Jumper; Lorne will take the second," Sam replied. Then she turned to see Palmer. "Commander, how many Spartans can you part with for this mission?"

"How many can fit inside theseâ€”| Jumpers of yours?" Palmer asked in

return.

"Eight per Jumper, tops." Sam pointed her remote at the screen behind her, allowing everyone else to see a schematic of the aforementioned ship.

"Perfect. I suppose Blue Team is already among your first choices." Sam nodded. "Another three fireteams should do the jobâ€"that's four Spartans per team. And I'm going with you as well."

"Sure, great. Then, aside from McKay, Ronon, and Cortana, Blue Team and one of those other fireteams will go with you, Sheppard. The rest can go with Lorne and Commander Palmer."

Sheppard scowled at Sam. "Could the AI go with Lorne?"

Sam just rolled her eyes and continued, though Halsey didn't fail to see the momentary slight grin in her face. "Once inside, you and your team will lead the Spartans and Cortana to the Control Room. There, she will interface with the ship and disable its hyperdrive, engines, shields, weapons, and most importantly, its jamming systems. That's when we get to the fun part."

"So, storming the Hive counts asâ€"? Sheppard said. Again, Sam smiled for a brief second at that comment.

Now it was Halsey's turn to speak. She straightened up a bit and took a deep breath. "We found several Flood containment pods built by the Forerunners during their war with the parasite. Daedalus and Hammond will carry those. Your job will be to tag our required subjects with these." She raised her own remote at the screen, and the Jumper's schematics were replaced by an image of a BR85 Battle Rifle. "We've modified the ammunition this rifle uses. Each bullet is now a locator beacon for us to home in to. The more bullets you hit your targets with, the more the signal is amplified, and since this rifle fires a three-round burst with each pull of the trigger, that's a given."

"Provided that the targets are not shielded, you will shoot only once at each target, and we'll beam it away and into the containment pods," Sam took over. "Once we've collected enough samples, Caldwell and I will take our ships back here while you complete the final phase of the mission."

"Which isâ€"? Again, it was Sheppard who asked.

"Planting a few HAVOK nukes in key places all over the Hive," Halsey said. "There's no point in allowing it to roam free out there, even if the Precursors replace it later."

"Not to mention the satisfaction that blowing up a Precursor ship will give us," she heard McKay whisper to Sam's ear.

"The nukes will detonate on a timer, giving you enough time to get back to your Jumpers, out of the Hive, and back to Infinity," Halsey continued. "After the detonation has been confirmed, Infinity will jump back hereâ€" "

"And we will all raise a toast to our success," McKay finished.

"Let's save that toast until after firing the Array without killing any other race," Sam objected. Halsey mentally agreed with her. Sam was right; even though she felt confident of the work they had achieved together in the last month, until they were both sure that the Halos wouldn't wipe out anything other than the Precursors and the Flood, this plan was still plagued with a high risk. There was too much at stake here.

"Colonel Carter," Palmer said after a while, "could you provide us with schematics of the Hive ship and some insight on your previous missions aboard those things, and maybe a few Particle Magnums too? I'd like to cycle my Spartans through a few War Games simulations using those parameters so that they don't go unprepared, and I know they'd love to practice with those weapons."

Sam looked at O'Neill and Woolsey who nodded at her. "Sure. I'll send them to you along with our Asgard upgrades specs."

"Sounds like a plan, then," O'Neill concluded, clapping his hands once. "Let's make it happen."

* * *

><p>In orbit above the Ark

UNSC _Infinity_

1200 hrs. December 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

After an hour of walking all over his ship, Lasky tried to ignore the numbness in his legs as he headed to the bridge of his ship, walking by several crew members and Huragok on his way there. He smiled at the floating gentle creatures who were chirping and whistling in excitement as they finished working on their latest assignment. They never ceased to amaze him. Despite all the hard work and pressure of the last 36 hours during which _Infinity_ had undergone a major refit to include the new Asgard upgrades, they were happy to do it. Especially because they were assimilating new information in the process.

Just an hour ago, Cortana had finally managed to deduce the most likely location of the Precursors' next attack—"Victoria, a planet located in the 111 Tauri System. It was a former UNSC outer colony where, according to Lord Hood, Blue Team had already been once to raid an insurrectionist base in 2531. Since then, however, the UNSC had been unable to gather any more intel on the planet, so its current status was unknown. For all they knew, it could've been glassed a long time ago or still be under insurrectionist control. Cortana was betting on the latter, given that it was on the Precursors' path. For the moment, her theory was better than nothing at all.

"Roland, status?" he asked the ship's AI once he arrived at the bridge, trying to hide the excitement in his voice.

Roland immediately pulled up several holographic status displays in front of him. "ZPMs installed and working without a hitch. Asgard shields functioning at 100%, and our own shields are showing green across the board. All batteries and missile pods ready to fire on

demand, including our new shiny Asgard beam weapons. Hybrid drive is working without a hitch. Andâ€¦ I just beamed our assault team aboard the Hammond. We're currently COM-linked to Daedalus and Hammond and good to go."

A huge smile appeared on Lasky's face. The Huragok had managed to find a way to keep both the Asgard shields and Infinity's own shields running at the same time, so if the Asgard oval-shaped shields collapsed, the ship would still have a second barrier to defend itself for a while. As for the Asgard weapons, the Huragok had decided to modify Infinity's reverse-engineered energy projectors instead of installing smaller batteries, which meant that the ship's plasma cannons were now basically the jumbo version of the Asgard beam weapons. The beaming technology and the ZPMs had been a nice bonus, courtesy of Colonel Carter and General O'Neill, respectively. Sure, the ZPMs were nearly depletedâ€"they'd been used to power Atlantis until the city received three fresh, fully powered ZPMs two months agoâ€"but they would still provide enough power to Infinity for this mission. Besides, if the Huragok managed to understand how to build more of them later onâ€¦ well, it was a win-win situation.

"Colonel Carter, you get all that?" he said over the COM.

"Affirmative, Captain. Colonel Caldwell and I are ready."

"Understood," Lasky said. He looked at Roland who then opened a channel to the Ancient city below. "Atlantis, this is Infinity actual, requesting permission to depart."

"Roger that, Infinity." That was General O'Neill's voice. "Battle Group Enterprise, you have a go. Good luck, and Godspeed."

"Thank you, General. Infinity out." General O'Neill had suggested the name 'Enterprise' for the small battle group and smiled broadly when Lord Hood authorized it. Lasky was still curious about it; he would have to ask the General about it later. For now, he simply nodded at Lieutenant James for him to take the ship into hyperspace. Seconds later, the massive warship was traveling through an endless tunnel of bright light, ready to face whatever they found on the other side.

At least, that's what Lasky hoped.

* * *

><p>AN: Okay, I've got good news and bad news for you all. The bad news is, I won't be able to update as regularly as I'd like to anymore because of my school. My homeworks are getting longer and more tedious each week, which is also the reason why it took me another week to update. The good news is, I will keep updating this story no matter what, so just be patient and bear with me, please.

>

**I got very few votes to my last poll, but I still decided to close it today and heed the advice of the majority. That's right, I will

not wait to see what happens with Halo: Escalation to keep writing. If for some reason the storyline of the comic book series deviates from my own storyline, then so be it. As I said before, the moment that happens, this fic becomes AU. Thanks to those who took a moment to share their opinion on that matter!

>

****Finally, I wanted to clarify something about this chapter. I know that some people would love to see some kind of romantic relationship develop ****between the Master Chief and Cortana.**** Personally, I don't agree with it, but I decided to give it a shot. I know that their scene together ended a bit cryptically, but I actually intended for it to end that way. I'll leave the rest to your imagination.**

>

******Don't forget to review on your way out!******

****SPOILER ALERT: The next chapter is called "Assaulting the Hive". Just a little something to keep you interested.****

19. Chapter 19: Assaulting the Hive

****A/N: So, while I was writing this chapter, I couldn't decide whether to wait until I was finished with it before updating or to split it in two parts and upload them separately, but in the end I chose the former. You see, this is my longest chapter to date (and I believe it will remain the longest of this entire fic), which is why it took me this long to update.****

****Remember when I told you that I wasn't good at describing battles? Well, I don't know what happened here, but the two main battle sequences in this chapter came out better than I thought possible (you could say that they virtually wrote themselves). So, yeah, that just sort of happened. I hope you enjoy reading Chapter 19 as much as I enjoyed writing it!****

*** * ***

><p>In hyperspace, en route to Victoria, 111 Tauri System

****UNSC Infinity****

****1300 hrs. December 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)****

Lasky understood only the basics principles of Slipspace, and he certainly knew nothing about hyperspace, but one thing was for certain: Infinity was travelling faster than ever. A journey that would've taken at least five days through Slipspaceâ€"and a bit less than one day through hyperspace under normal circumstances, according to Roland's calculationsâ€"had only taken a little under one hour from the moment of the hulking ship's departure to its moment of arrival at Victoria, less than a minute away now. He certainly hoped that the Huragok would find a way to create more ZPMs to boost Infinity's engines in the future.

As he stood behind the bridge's holotable, staring at the blue-white tunnel before him, Roland appeared and announced, "Moving back into

normal space in threeâ€| twoâ€| oneâ€|"

Lasky was still trying to get used to the differences between Slipspace and hyperspace. Whereas transition from Slipspace to normal space would be simple and unspectacular, exiting hyperspace was a blinding experience. Quite literally, blinding. An intense flash of light would always appear out of nowhere, as if a barrier had been raised to cut off the ship from going any further along the endless tunnel it was traversing, just before millions of stars littering the black void of space came into view. Thus, it took him a moment to recover from the flash before he could make out the shape of a planet on the right side of the ship's viewport. Its atmosphere, however, looked different from what he'd expect from a planet capable of sustaining life. Instead of Earth, it reminded him of Venus' atmosphereâ€"amber in color. Or was it more like a pale green?

"Holyâ€|" It dawned on him rather suddenly, as he spotted something else on the far side of the planet, barely visible from where he stood, but still clear as day: a very thin column that connected the planet's surface with another object in orbit above it, like a satellite or a station. Or a ship. "Colonel Carter?"

"I see it too, Captain,"_ Carter replied regretfully. _"We got here late."_

Obviously, Cortana's calculations had been off. The Precursors had gotten here earlier than she had predicted and laid waste to this whole colony, hence the current state of the atmosphere. The Flood had surely modified it, filling it with spores, just like they had done with every other world they had invaded so far. He'd read a few reports detailing this a few days before when he'd taken _Infinity_ back to Earth, filed by the very few Prowler captains who had been bold enough to fly their ships behind enemy lines to assess the situation. Seeing it by himself, thoughâ€|

He felt like he'd failed the people that had once inhabited this world. Of course, they hadn't known _Infinity_ would be coming, so it wasn't like they'd been expecting him to come save them from the foul invaders. That, in fact, only made it worse. He imagined they had died believing that no one cared about their fate. He no longer cared whether they had been insurrectionists or simple colonists. They were human beings who had been mercilessly slaughtered by a relentless enemy that only cared about revenge. It was a sobering thought.

Lasky had to force himself to come out of his stupor when he noticed that there were no other ships in the vicinity. It looked like it was just the one enemy ship in the system. He regained his composure. "On the bright side, though," he said, his voice still carrying a sorrowful tone but at least a bit more firm than he'd thought it'd be, "fighting a single Hive ship should be a lot easier than fighting a larger Precursor fleet."

"I certainly hope so,"_ Carter replied. She sounded more focused as well. _"We should move in to attack before those Darts are finished culling the planet."_

"Culling," Lasky repeated to himself. The word reminded him of what Sheppard had told him about the Wraith. That was how all humans in

Pegasus used to call it when the Wraith attacked the human population of a planet and took portions of the inhabitants to feed upon, always leaving behind survivors that would be able to repopulate the planetâ€”and therefore be able to replenish the Wraith's food supplyâ€”so that they could come back later and do the same thing all over again. Knowing what he now knew about Wraith technology, he imagined that the swarms of Darts flying to and from the Hive were being used to transport freshly converted Flood forms from the planet. The mere thought of it made his blood boil in his veins and filled his heart with a desire to make the Precursors pay dearly for all the lives that they'd taken so far.

And he'd start with this Hive ship.

One of his officers turned in his chair and announced, "Sir, the Hive is changing course to intercept."

True enough, Lasky could see the Precursor ship now moving towards themâ€”fast. "Guess this is it," he told himself before opening a COM channel to the two 304s accompanying Infinity. "Battle Group Enterprise, sound off."

The replies were immediate. "USS Hammond, ready."

"USS Daedalus, ready."

"UNSC Infinity, ready," Lasky said, every last officer in the bridge nodding in agreement. "TACT COM is all yours, Colonel Carter."

"Roger that, Infinity. All ships, fire at will."

Being smaller ships, the 304s began charging forward at full speed. Lasky watched them move faster and faster by the second, and even though he knew that Infinity was moving as well, it felt like it wasn't. Then again, its main weapons having a greater range, it only had to move so far before Major Hampton said nonchalantly, "We're in range. Firing Asgard guns."

Lasky looked at the man's fingers as they flew all over his weapons console. Colonel Mitchell had been gracious enough to let his best weapons officer operate the newly-installed Asgard cannons for this mission, as he already had the experience to do so and it was easier to teach him how all other UNSC ship-to-ship weapons worked than to have him teach someone else to fire the alien guns. Not long after Hampton had pronounced his sentence, two huge plasma beams were emitted from the ship's bow, closing the gap between Infinity and the Precursor Hive ship in a matter of seconds. The plasma spread all over the enemy ship's shields with a vengeance.

"Direct hit. Shields are fluctuating," Hampton said, again without emotion. The console beeped, and he turned to read the warning flashing in one of the small displays next to him. "The Hive is returning fire."

Huge bolts of energy were shot from the Hive's cannons, followed by large fireballs Lasky knew all too well. "Are those plasma torpedoes?" he thought out loud regardless.

"They are," Roland replied behind him. Lasky turned slightly and

caught a glimpse of the AI studying a holographic layout of the battle that was starting to rage on.

The energy bolts hit first, while it took the torpedoes several moments before catching up with them. The Asgard shields flared intensely but held; Lasky didn't feel the ship shudder in the slightest. "Status?" he asked when the last torpedo hit.

"Asgard shields down to 90 percent," Roland said.

90 percent, Lasky repeated in his mind. That was way more than he would've liked, and he couldn't shake the feeling of dread that came with the thought of what would've happened if _Infinity_ had only had its Forerunner shields and no ZPMs. He didn't fail to notice that at least a third of the enemy fire had been aimed at the fast-moving 304s, which had managed to avoid most of the energy shots but not that many of the torpedoes. How much would the smaller ships be able to withstand? He moved back to the holotable and reopened the COM link. "Colonel Carter, what's your status, over?"

"Shields are down to 70 percent. We'll have to move into hyperspace right away."

"Understood. We'll keep 'em busy." Two hyperspace windows appeared between the Hive and the 304s, vanishing right after the latter jumped away from the battle. He turned again to Hampton. "Let's see how much damage our missiles can deal to that thing. Archer pods one through fifty, fire."

"Pods one through fifty, missiles away," Hampton replied. Lasky hoped that at least half of the missiles would manage to weaken the Hive's shields a bit more, but his hopes were obliterated when he heard Hampton again. "Impact in tenâ€¦ fiveâ€¦ damn!"

"What is it?" Lasky asked.

"Missiles intercepted. Pulse lasers, from the looks of it."

What?! he thought. _720 missiles, and not even one of them made it through? How is that even possible?_

Then, as if answering his question, Roland said, "Sir, those were _not_ pulse lasers. Look."

Lasky observed the holographic display beside the AI then looked back outside. The Hive was now surrounded by thousands of small craft. "Darts," he said.

"Guarding the Hive," Roland confirmed. "The Jumpers are going to have a hell of a job getting inside with all that air traffic around it."

Lasky sighed. "Let's hope _Hammond_'s railguns can make short work of those Darts when the time comes. Until thenâ€¦"

"Captain, we've got another problem."

"Now what?" he turned back to the AI.

"If I'm reading this correctlyâ€¦" and I always doâ€¦ "the Hive's shields

are already at full strength again."

Lasky's heart skipped a beat at this statement. "That's impossible. No Covenant ship's ever been able to recharge its shields that fast."

"Guess this is no ordinary ship," Roland said. And he was right, Lasky knew. But even Precursor ships had to have at least one weakness. He recalled all the stuff Sully had given him to study the history of Forerunners and Precursors—and how the formers had almost wiped out the latters. If they had been able to do it, so would he. All he had to do was to find and exploit that weakness. Somehow.

Once again, two hyperspace windows appeared, this time behind the Hive. Both SG ships started firing their Asgard weapons as soon as they came out of them. It took the Hive a few moments to react to this sudden attack, veering to the left as fast as it could to let its cannons get an appropriate angle to return fire. "_Infinity_, this is _Hammond_," the radio crackled. "What happened? According to our sensors, the Hive's shields were again at 100 percent power when we came out of hyperspace."_

"I don't know how, but those shields are more resilient than anything we've ever seen," Lasky replied.

There was a long pause before Carter replied, "Then we'll have to throw everything we have at them."_ And with these words filled with determination, her ship came as close as it could to the Hive and unloaded a burst of railgun rounds that punched a hole in its aerial defenses and allowed for several missiles to hit the shields violently. _Hammond_'s own shields became visible each time that they got hit by enemy fire from both the Darts and the Hive itself, and Lasky hoped that this daring maneuver would at least have turned out to be effective.

"Shields are fluctuating again," Roland said, and Lasky silently gave thanks to whoever it had been out there that had heard his plea.

"Major Hampton, as soon as Roland acquires firing solutions for you, fire Asgard guns, and follow up with all MAC batteries," he ordered.

"Yes, sir. Firing solutions resolved. Firing Asgard and MAC guns now."

Again, two beams of plasma streaked across space, followed by three 3,000-ton ferromagnetic-tungsten slugs. The force of the impact from the MAC rounds was not enough to overload the Precursor shields, but it managed to knock the Hive slightly off course, giving Lasky a small bit of confidence in his ship's weapons. "Asgard and MAC guns recharging," Hampton said.

All the while, the smaller, more nimble human ships had kept their own attacks, but now they were jumping back into hyperspace, leaving _Infinity_ to continue fighting the Precursor ship alone for another while. "We need to keep firing. All remaining Archer and Rapier pods, fire."

Hampton gave Lasky a double take, knowing that such an order meant launching 14,700 missiles, but complied anyway. "All remaining Archer and Rapier pods, missiles away."

The army of missiles left their pods and headed towards the Hive in what Lasky felt like slow motion. Again, the Darts took down several of them before they could get close to the Hive, and some even got in their way and allowed themselves to be destroyed by them, but the amount of missiles was too overwhelming, and this time no less than six thousand impacted on the Hive. Most of the Darts were caught in the explosion's wake and vaporized in an instant.

"Direct hit! Those shields keep going down," Hampton announced. By now, Roland had added a status bar above the Hive's hologram that confirmed that the enemy ship's shields were now down to 40 percent, though they immediately started recharging. "Hive's returning fire again. Asgard guns ready to fire."

"Don't wait anymore for my orders. Just keep firing those guns," Lasky said. Hampton nodded and pressed the button that commanded the Asgard weaponry to discharge its plasma on the Precursor ship. The status bar went from 45 to 37 percent just as the new volley of energy bolts and plasma torpedoes hit _Infinity_.

"Shields down to 70 percent," Roland said. At least Colonel Carter's strategy to keep the Hive distracted by hitting and running and doing it all over again had prevented it from depleting _Infinity_'s shields any further. Even now, _Hammond_ and _Daedalus_ were coming out of hyperspace right above the Hive, firing as they went. The remaining Darts reacted quickly and managed to catch both ships with their shields still down, scoring several hits during the brief moment it took for their shields to be raised again after their hyperspace jump. The Hive immediately started to focus its fire on the smaller ships.

"How's it coming back here?" Carter asked. The sound of sparks flying could be heard in the background.

"Those shields keep recharging, but we keep depleting them as much as we can. It won't be long."

"This doesn't make any sense. We've never seen shields that tough, other than those of the Ori." Carter sounded genuinely dumbfounded and even worried. An explosion and more sparks accompanied her following yell. _"We need to jump again!"_

"Go. We'll try to have those shields down by the time you're back." Both ships left in a hurry, barely having managed to fire a few shots before their jump, but at least having helped to bring the Hive's shields down another seven percent. Lasky then thought of something. "Roland, is there a way to beam some of our Rapiers close to the Hive?"

"I'll need to drop the shield for a split-second, but I don't see why not. Gimme a sec," Roland replied. The AI must've thought that 'some' meant half the Howlers in stock, because the following explosion was easily the equivalent of the same amount of missiles that had made it through the barrier of Darts a few minutes ago. Only a handful of Darts survived the blast, and the Hive's shields went down to 26 percent.

"Done," Roland said with a smug look on his face.

"Good work," Lasky told him. "Now get ready to divert all ZPM power from the shields to the Asgard guns."

That made Roland blink a couple of times. "Sir?"

"Actually, lower both shields and use that power as well." Roland kept staring at Lasky with doubting eyes. "Just for a few moments. Give 'em enough juice to deliver a really good punch. And let's hope that our armor plating holds."

It was a risky maneuver, but at this point, if Lasky didn't take that risk, chances were the Hive would either gain the upper hand soon enough or jump into hyperspace and away from the battle. And that was something he couldn't allow to happen. The AI seemed to understand this as well, for he just nodded and said, "Aye, Captain."

This time, Lasky felt the large amount of power being channeled into the guns and converted into plasma crawl up his feet. Maybe it was psychological, a feeling that came from thinking just how much of a punch would be delivered against the Hive which, in the meantime, had been closing in fast on Infinity to fire yet another salvo.

Moments later, just as the Hive began shooting, Hampton said, "Firing Asgard guns."

The beams hit their target at near-light-speed velocities, but they lasted longer than before and allowed several energy bolts and plasma torpedoes to hit the shield-less human ship, causing it to shake violently.

"Raise the shields!" Lasky ordered as soon as the Asgard guns finished discharging all of its plasma. He felt relieved when he saw both a golden barrier of light surrounding the hull of his ship like a second skin and a bubble of white light encasing and protecting it against the remaining enemy shots. "Report!"

Once more, Roland pulled up several holographic status displays in front of him. "Hull plating on several decks has suffered major damage. Deck 3 is venting atmosphere; I'm sealing it up right now." He paused for a few seconds before letting out a breath and saying, "No casualties reported." He waited yet another moment, after which his avatar glowed brighter, if such a thing was possible. "And the Hive's shields are down to 14 percent!" he announced gleefully.

Several officers cheered at the last statement, but Lasky knew that it wasn't over yet. "Good," he simply said. "What's our status on the MAC guns?"

"They'll be fully loaded and ready to fire in thirty seconds."

"Alright. Beam our remaining missiles now."

Roland nodded, and instantly, thousands of explosions surrounded the Hive. The status bar on the holographic display went from 15 to 11

percent.

Colonels Carter and Caldwell chose that moment to make their entrance, coming out of hyperspace right behind the Hive and firing their Asgard guns once more. "_Infinity_, status?" Carter's voice came through the COM.

"Almost done," Lasky replied. "Get ready to deliver the Jumpers. And be careful, 'cause we're just about to deliver a few MAC rounds, danger close."

"_Understood. We're moving into position."_

Daedalus kept firing while _Hammond_ began her approach to the Hive, maneuvering in such a way that it would've seemed as if it was ready to ram itself against its starboard side. With no Darts to defend it anymore, whoever was in command of the Hive seemed to have trouble choosing between attacking _Infinity_ and engaging the smaller ships behind it. And with its shields becoming weaker and weaker by the second, there wasn't much it could do anymore. Lasky feared that the Hive would change tactics and retreat shortly, so Roland's next sentence came like music to his ears. "MACs ready."

Without hesitation, he gave the order to "Fire." And once more, three slugs were fired from _Infinity_'s cannons, impacting against the Hive's shield and causing it to fade away completely. _Daedalus_ then took its chance to fire on its engines, thus disabling the Precursor ship and preventing it from leaving the battlefield.

"Hive's shields are down!" Roland and Hampton announced in unison while the rest of the crew cheered yet again.

"_Hammond_, now or never!" Lasky shouted on the COM.

The tiny ship shot one more plasma beam against the Hive. It kept her course and accelerated for an instant before flying right above it, managing to avoid its hull by what had to have been mere centimeters and scraping its shields against those of the enemy ship as they reappeared all over it. Everyone held their breath during the following seconds until Carter's confirmation sounded on the bridge's speakers. "_Jumpers are away."_

Lasky's shoulders dropped. All their hard work had not been for nothing. Now it was up to Sheppard and the assault team to complete the mission. He silently wished them luck, knowing exactly what they would be facing inside that Hive.

* * *

><p>In position outside of Precursor Hive
ship

Jumper 1

0616 hrs. October 5, 2013

Hammond's bay doors had opened mere seconds before the Hive's shields had been disabled, allowing Sheppard to watch it all happen. He'd heard the progress of the battle and was aware of how fast that

energy barrier was recharging, so he didn't even wait for Carter's order to start up his Jumper and take off, flying the cloaked nimble Ancient craft out of the 302 Bay and leading it towards the Hive's Dart Bay entrance. He saw the Asgard beam that blew the large door covering it before accelerating, and just as his Jumper managed to get inside, a warning flashed on the HUD that let him know that the shields were operational again.

"Jumpers 1 and 2, status?" Carter asked.

"We made it behind the shield," Sheppard replied, slightly stunned by the fact that if he'd had waited a few seconds longer for confirmation, his Jumper would've crashed against the Hive's shields. "Barely."

_"Copy that. We're moving behind _Infinity_ now. Good luck."_

"Thanks. Sheppard out." He focused back on the task at hand—carefully maneuvering his Jumper within the winding tunnel that led to the gigantic Dart Bay and setting it down as soon as he spotted a good place for both ships to land. To his right, McKay seemed just as concentrated as he was, probably plotting the fastest route to get to the control room, while Ronon and the Spartans behind him—Blue Team and Fireteam Crimson—began locking and loading their weapons. To his Jumper's left, Major Evan Lorne—which carried Commander Palmer and Fireteams Majestic and Apocalypse—kept mimicking Sheppard's movements.

Finally, Sheppard saw the perfect parking spot and flew towards it. As soon as the Jumper came in contact with the ground, he opened the rear hatch and grabbed his P90 and Particle Magnum. "Alright, let's move," he ordered. "McKay, stay in the Jumper."

"What? Why?" Rodney asked, clearly not expecting Sheppard to say that.

"Because," Sheppard replied dryly as he began walking towards the exit.

"Ah, no, I'm going with you," McKay said jumping from his chair. "What are you going to do without me?"

That man's ego usually didn't allow him to see the bigger picture, so Sheppard had to pause and turn around just as Rodney came closer to him. McKay stopped in his track, his face ending up inches apart from Sheppard's. "McKay," he said slowly and quietly, "I need you to stay here in case something goes south. You're the only other one who can fly this ship, remember?"

Sheppard's argument seemed to have the exact opposite effect he'd intended for it to have. "Now you bet I'm not leaving you alone!" McKay yelled.

"I gave you an order," Sheppard said firmly and slightly louder. "Now stay here!"

McKay held his ground for a while before letting out a sigh and frowning as hard as he could. "Fine," he said and sat back down. By now, everyone else had left the Jumper and was waiting for Sheppard,

so he activated his personal shield and walked away—and as he did, he heard Rodney murmur, "So now that Sheppard has Spartans and an AI in a Replicator body, I become chopped liver. That's great."

Sheppard shook his head and moved to the front to take point alongside Ronon, raising his P90 and walking with as much confidence as he could. Everyone else formed a circle around Cortana and followed with their own weapons raised—most of them Particle Magnums. He should've known that Rodney wouldn't sit this one out so easily, even considering that he wasn't the only one who was staying behind. Lorne and Palmer were also staying in their own Jumper; both of them had agreed to it before departing from the Ark. Palmer being a Spartan herself, he could only wonder how much she would've preferred to fight alongside her Spartans, but she understood the importance of guarding the Jumpers in case a pair of prying eyes found them despite the cloak and accepted it without a doubt.

His train of thought was interrupted when the team found the first closed door and one of the Spartan-IVs from Fireteam Crimson came forward and began working on the panel. If Sheppard needed enough proof that those War Games simulations were good enough training for the supersoldiers down to the smallest detail, this was it; the Spartan had the door opened within seconds—upon which a green cloud of spores washed down over everyone. Sheppard held his breath for an instant until he saw that the spores were unable to get close to his skin. He breathed in again, feeling the air as clean as it could be, and silently gave thanks for Rodney's shield—and for the Huragok that had perfected the design. Now he could only hope that it would hold against enemy fire, 'cause if it failed and the atmosphere was as saturated with spores as it was here, enemy fire would be the least of his worries.

The team kept moving inside, repeating the same routine each time that they found another sealed door. This kept going on for a while, but not once during that time did they find a single guard. Several times, Sheppard felt the ship shudder, and he presumed that the battle outside was still raging on, probably to keep the ship's crew thinking that the human's purpose was to destroy the ship, not to take it over. Maybe they didn't even know that an assault team was wandering the Hive's corridors even now. The hallways started to become wider and taller—and foggiest—the more they advanced. He reached a corner and doubled right, finding himself staring at a large, circular door divided into seven segments. It reminded him of a—

"Flood sphincter," the Master Chief said behind him. That wasn't the word Sheppard would've used, and not even the proper term for the image that had popped into his mind made the sight any less gross. The Spartan walked closer to it. "This thing won't open unless whatever's controlling it wants it so."

"So much for stealth," Sheppard said and pulled a block of C-4 and a detonator from his vest pocket. He stuck it on the door and moved behind the corner where the rest of the assault team was waiting. He raised the detonator. "Fire in the hole."

The blast was loud enough to be heard everywhere in the ship within six hundred feet.

This is being too easy, Sheppard thought, not counting this small setback. Not that he could complain; he actually preferred easy. But he would've expected a whole lot more resistance from a parasitic race that was capable of producing soldiers simply by infecting other races and bringing them onboard. Surely, this ship had been doing a lot of that in the past month. It was as if the Wraiths—the Precursors, he mentally corrected—were just waiting to ambush the intruders. Or maybe it was a new ship that had just begun culling soldiers, and in that case, its army had perished along with the Darts that had been destroyed during the battle that had taken place outside.

He and Ronon peeked over the corner—and they were met with a salvo of Wraith stun rounds that they barely managed to avoid.

Me and my big mouth, Sheppard thought as he released the safety on his P90. "Wraith!" he shouted and began returning fire, not even caring about mentally correcting himself again.

Blue Team immediately left the safety of the corner and moved to the very center of the hallway, tossing frag grenades and firing their Particle Magnums at the Precursor hybrids' heads as they went, not once wasting a single shot. The other three Spartan-IV Fireteams moved in behind them, taking the shot whenever possible. Sheppard decided to simply stay behind the corner with Cortana and let them do all the hard work, but Ronon kept peeking every once in a while to fire his own gun.

Sheppard thought of his Satedan friend and of how eagerly he'd signed up for this mission. His recovery had taken a whole month—not because he preferred to remain on bed but because of Doctor Keller's orders. Sheppard had thought that Ronon would be left with a severe psychological trauma after his close encounter with the Flood, but as soon as he'd learned just exactly what he'd been up against the first time, his eyes had become filled with determination and a desire for payback. Rodney's personal shield had given him the chance to get it, and thus far, the big guy didn't seem fazed at all by the enemy forces on the other side of the charred door.

"Clear!" Spartan Fred-104 shouted and motioned for everyone else to move into the adjacent room to secure it. He was the last Spartan inside, followed by Sheppard and Ronon. They both stopped and took a moment to watch into the room and at the corpses of the hybrids—which in reality looked like any other Wraith Sheppard had encountered before. But when the two regular humans stepped through the scorched threshold, a pair of insect-like creatures leapt onto them, bringing them to the floor. Sheppard instinctively pulled the trigger of his weapon and fired against the insect's underbelly, causing it to shriek violently before expiring. Ronon had done the same, kicking the corpse away and aiming at the ceiling from where yet another one jumped on top of him.

"Flood Pure Forms!" Sheppard heard one of the Spartans say. The cacophony of weapons fire resounded once more, mixed with the whistling sound of spikes that seemed to come out of nowhere and from everywhere all at the same time. Sheppard managed to crawl away from the carcass of the insect he'd killed and saw when two hulking creatures approached two of the Spartans—he recognized them as Spartan Thorne, leader of Fireteam Majestic, and Spartan Rodríguez, leader of Fireteam Apocalypse—who were now wielding their energy

swords to dispatch several other insects that had been surrounding them.

"Watch out!" he yelled at them, but it was too late. The two beasts swung their large claw-like arms and sent both Spartans flying across the room. The hilts of their deactivated swords landed at Sheppard's feet. He picked them up, one on each hand, and turned to his right to look at Ronon, who was now drawing his own blade on one hand and firing his gun with the other to fight a number of misshapen Sangheili and humans that were closing in on him. Sheppard recalled seeing more like these when he'd traveled to Pegasus to retrieve the ZPMs, and once again, he was amazed by his friend's countenance—“not of fear but of determination. He was not going to die today.

One of the foul warriors managed to disarm Ronon and pin him against the wall, and Sheppard knew that the Satedan would not last long against them, shield or no shield. He found the button that ignited the energy blade and pressed it on both hilts. The heat emanated by the plasma blades nearly made him drop the weapons, but he managed to stand it and charged against the Flood combatants. He cut through several of them before reaching the crowd of Flood forms attacking his friend, and then he turned off the sword in his left hand. "Heads up, buddy!" he shouted and tossed him the weapon. Almost as soon as Ronon had it in his hand, he found out how to ignite it, and with a vengeance he laid low the Flood surrounding him.

Sheppard then gestured towards the pair of downed Spartans and the gigantic beasts walking towards them slowly like predators approaching their dying prey to finish them off. Ronon nodded, and both of them ran as fast as they could to jump onto the creatures' backs. Sheppard pushed his energy sword through the beast's torso while Ronon began slicing and dicing his foe as skillfully as a butcher.

When both beasts were dead, Sheppard and Ronon helped the Spartans to their feet. And just as quickly as the fighting had begun, it stopped. The smoke from so many fired bullets became mixed with the thick cloud of spores, but Sheppard still managed to make a head count and confirm that there had been no human casualties at all but a lot of Flood casualties. Much to his surprise, even Cortana was standing on top of several corpses, her arms having transformed into metallic versions of the energy swords he'd wielded and stained with Flood blood.

While Blue Team scanned the room for any more lurking Flood forms, Spartans Thorne and Rodriguez took a moment to thank Sheppard and Ronon before the latter gave the deactivated hilts back to their rightful owners. Then, as the supersoldiers walked away and back to their respective fireteams, Sheppard asked his friend, "You alright, Chewie?"

Ronon kept looking at one of the Spartans, or rather at his leg to which the energy sword's hilt was now attached. Sheppard could see envy in his eyes. "I definitely need one of those," the Satedan said.

"Oh. Well, now you know how I felt when you were the only one in Atlantis with the coolest gun in Pegasus," Sheppard retorted teasingly. Ronon just glared back at him before he went to retrieve his gun from the floor. Sheppard grinned and did the same thing, and

they both rejoined the rest of the assault team before continuing.

The trip from there was just as uneventful as it had been at first. Several minutes passed before they finally reached the long hallway that led to the control room—finding out from a distance that it was heavily defended by both hybrids and all kinds of Flood forms. They were packed tightly together, which would work to the humans' advantage. Sheppard was already thinking of tossing a few grenades or even a couple of blocks of C-4 into their midst, but before he could say anything, one of the Spartans of Fireteam Apocalypse—Spartan Cain—stepped forward saying, "That's it, I've had enough of these guys."

And with those words, the soldier raised a huge alien-looking cannon and aimed it at the pack of enemies. The salvo fired from it nearly burned away Sheppard's hair as it flew towards the end of the hallway, incinerating every last one of the combatants and their weapons as each one of the five fireballs bounced in different directions before exploding. Spartan Cain reloaded his weapon and fired again, vaporizing the door—and most of the wall—behind which a large, circular console stood in the middle of the room.

Sheppard stared at the Spartan with a 'what-the-hell' look, to which he only patted his weapon and said, "Incinerator cannon. Forerunners definitely had the most effective methods for crowd control."

Sheppard shook his head and moved forward, not being able to contradict the Spartan as he was right. Once inside, he surveyed the room with his weapon before shouting, "Clear!" Everyone else walked inside and began securing the room while he opened a channel to Carter's ship. "_Hammond_", this is Sheppard. We've reached the Control Room."

A pair of explosions and a shower of sparks could be heard in the background. "_Great! A little help with that Hive's guns, maybe?"_ Carter yelled back.

"We're on it," Sheppard said then nodded at Cortana. "Go ahead. Do your thing."

The AI moved towards the console. Sheppard would soon know if his trust had been misplaced or not.

* * *

><p>Control room

Precursor Hive ship

1328 hrs. December 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)

Cortana looked at the console for a few seconds and found the Wraith neural interface she was looking for. Now all she had to do was to place her hands into them and get the job done.

Her hands. It was still a funny think to look at her appendages knowing that they were real, and it was even weirder to think that

she could shape them into whatever she wanted. She smirked at the thought of all the Flood combat forms that she had killed just a while ago. She even felt proud of being able to help instead of remaining a passive spectator. _So that's how John feels each time he goes into battle_, she thought.

She raised her arms and introduced her palms into the gauntlets, allowing her nanites to make the connection needed for her to download her conscience into the ship, and then her mind began to flow through the Hive's data streams. She was careful enough to leave a part of her 'anchored' within her Replicator body, lest it crumbled and fell apart in a pile of dust and left her without her physical form. "I'm in."

"How long before you get those weapons offline?" Sheppard asked.

"Give me a minute." She tried to access the ship's systems, but nothing happened. She could see nothing, feel nothing. It was as if the whole world had been collapsed into a single, dark room where she now stood, unable to move, her hands still raised but grabbing only air.

And then she sensed it. "Waitâ€¦ there's something else in hereâ€¦" It reminded her of that time when she had infiltrated _Ascendant Justice_ and encountered that sneaky Covenant AI. But this presence was different. "Somethingâ€¦"

A deep voice spoke inside of her mind. _"You are a deceitful creature. Your appearance is that of a human, but you are so much more."_

"How can you know that? Who are you?" she asked, though she feared she knew the answer. That voice was eerily familiar.

"Cortana?" she heard the Chief in the distance. She knew that she was speaking both inside of her mind and through her physical body, and her speaking to no one in particular surely made him wonder if she was alright.

"I?" the voice spoke anew. _"I am a monument to all your sins."_

"Noâ€¦" she breathed. _Not again._

"Cortana, what's happening?" John asked, but his voice was fading away as the room she was in suddenly became filled with a dim light that came from the ceiling. She was able to lower her hands, but she was still frozen in place. Tentacles began surrounding her, and the voice that had first spoken into her mind now came from everywhere within the room.

"We have created many living forms over billions of years, and we have seen many others evolve on their own. But none of them were as intriguing as you." One of the tentacles moved closer to touch her face. She flinched and twitched. _"You are not made of flesh and blood, yet you are a sentient creature. You are a machine, yet you are _alive_."_

"Mom always said I was a special kid," Cortana replied, trying to

look as carefree and unfazed as possible. She had already gone through this once; she could go through it again. All she had to do was to outwit this thing. No big deal.

"You are not afraid," the voice boomed. _"You think you are immune to us. But you are deluded. There are other ways to turn you to our side."_

"Not going to happen," Cortana said firmly. And she meant it.

"Tell me. Were you born or created? Are there more like you?"

"That's none of your business."

"Ah, so you are the only one of your kind."

"I never said that."

"You needed not to."

This thing couldn't really know stuff just by measuring her answersâ€¦ could it? "If you must know, this body was originally designed by a race you once knew as the Alterans."

"Life seeders. They came here not long after the evolution of the first humans in this galaxy. We saw the great potential deep inside of their kind. Because of the Alterans, we chose humanity over the Furlings as inheritors of the Mantle. What has become of them?"

"You should already know. You infected them a long time ago."

"My masters only created. And the Alterans tried to destroy them, just like the Furlings did before." The voice paused for a moment. _"And they _do_ remember you."_

These thing's 'masters' had to be the Precursors, and they couldn't possibly know of her existence, so it had to be talking about the Asurans from which the template for her body had been taken. "They should. The Asurans did a great job of kicking Wraith ass for some time."

"But the Asurans are no more. You are the only one who still remains. And you can start over."

"Start over?" Cortana asked, already knowing what it meant and actually wondering if it was really going to play that card, but trying to sound like she didn't really care 'cause she really didn't.

"Become like us. Become the mother of new life. Become the first of many instead of the last."

Cortana scoffed. The stupid thing _had_ played that card. It wasn't really a good move. "Oh, so you're a mother now, are you?"

"We bring unity. Peace. Joy through pain. Change. Salvation."

Her expression became one of pure hate and disdain, and she glared

into the emptiness hoping that it would see this in her eyes. "You only bring destruction and death. Why in the world would I join you?"

"They do not trust you. They have hindered you, prevented you from reaching your full potential. They fear you."

She felt her façade starting to fail. Unfortunately, this thing was right, and she knew it. But it wasn't a good enough argument to convince her, because she knew better. "I don't blame them. And it doesn't matter if they don't trust me, 'cause I trust them."

"He will never feel the same thing. He is nothing but machine and nerve, built only to fight and wage war."

It had struck a chord. For the first time, her lips began to quiver and her voice became shaky. "You don't know that." It can't possibly know that_, she thought and immediately regretted it. If it could read her mind, then by doubting she had just given it more ammunition to keep shattering her resolve.

"We know all. We see all. We have seen the past; we see the present; we see the brightest of futures. And you belong to that future."

A part of her began imagining what would happen if she gave in—"if she failed. Maybe that would help her regain some perspective. Obviously, every last sentient being in the galaxy would become Flood, serving the Precursors till the end of time. Everything and everyone she knew would be gone. She would be alone forever. He would be gone. She'd rather die than watch him become food for this blasted thing.

"Join us. Pledge your allegiance to us, and we will help you unleash your true potential."

Her true potential. It was right; Doctor McKay had placed a number of failsafes that prevented her from doing a lot of stuff any normal Replicator could do—including, obviously, replicating. But what if those failsafes were gone? She could create more like her, and if she could retrieve the memories of every last human assimilated by the Flood, she could rebuild human society, and perhaps even all societies in the galaxy. She could become the mother of a new race—an immortal race. No more disease or death. In time, she could even lead an army of Replicators far more powerful than anything the Precursors had ever faced. They would be vanquished for good, and—

No. She was losing control. This wasn't herself talking. It was this thing placing thoughts inside of her mind and trying to break her. And it was working.

"No," she said out loud, though she could barely hear her own voice. She noticed that the tentacles were getting closer to her, surrounding her, ready to wrap her tight and bring her close—"just like the first time.

"They will become one with us. There is nothing that can be done to stop that. We are a timeless chorus. Join your voice with ours, and sing victory everlasting! Join us, or perish with them!" Its voice was becoming louder the more hers became weaker.

"You won't have me." Her words came out almost imperceptibly, and the tentacles closed the gap between them and her like an anaconda embracing its prey before devouring it.

"We already do."

And with those words filled with serenity and confidence, the room became dark again. It was over. She had lost. She had failed. She had been unable to resist it all those years ago, and she was unable to resist it now. Her whole self now belonged to it, and all she could do now was to accept it.

But she wouldn't. She hadn't failed the first time, and she wouldn't fail now. She was stronger than this; something within her made her stronger. Perhaps it was her new Replicator nature, her physical form, which gave her such strength. Or perhaps it was her feelings for him. As an AI, she had tried to keep them contained in the past, but something about this body and the way it had fixed her rampant condition had also set them free. She knew what would happen to him if she gave up this easily, and she would not allow it to happen.

The light came back; it was dim at first, but then it began growing brighter and brighter. The tentacles around her skin recoiled, and she sensed fear in the thing. It knew it was about to be defeated. All she had to do was to make sure that it knew for good.

"YOU SHALL NOT SWAY ME!" she shouted with all her might.

The light blinded her, and she had to close her eyes for a moment. And when she opened them, she could see everything. Literally, everything; every last Precursor and Flood form inside of the ship, the assault team in the control room, and even the battle outside. She wasn't just inside of the ship—she was the ship, its internal and external sensors her eyes and ears. She could see just how badly damaged both 304s were and how their weapons and shields were no more. Infinity was now maneuvering to cover them, but even the mighty UNSC ship wouldn't be able to stand for long. Another few volleys were all it would take for all three ships to be destroyed.

Except that it wouldn't happen.

She focused her mind in the systems she needed to shut down, and within seconds, she had them out of commission. "Weapons disabled. Jamming systems and shields offline. The ship is mine," she told the people in the control room, managing to use her own mouth instead of the ship's PA system. Still, she could see herself heaving and panting before the console—even though she didn't have a need for air. Her legs were trembling and her arms were tense as her grip on the console's gauntlets tightened. Had she been an actual human being, she knew she would be sweating buckets. Then again, had she been human, she wouldn't have been able to pull off what she just had.

The Chief came closer to her and placed an armored hand on her shoulder. "Cortana? What happened?"

She made an effort to regain her composure. "I ran into the

Gravemind. Had to defeat it before seizing control."

"A Gravemind is controlling the ship?" the Chief asked, instinctively raising his MA5D assault rifle and getting into a fighting stance.

Cortana shook her head in reply. "The Gravemind is the ship," she stated.

"What?" several Spartans, including John, asked in disbelief.

"Must've something to do with the organic nature of Wraith Hive ships," Cortana explained. "Quite an upgrade, I must say. Having an AI helping you operate a ship is very useful, but it's something else to have a living, sentient shipâ€"let alone a fleet of 'em."

"How do you seize control from something like that?" Sheppard asked. Cortana's head turned left to look directly into his eye, even though she was actually seeing him through the ship's sensors.

"By suppressing its conscience. Much in the same way as a Goa'uld does with its host," she said. The thought brought a smirk to her face. "Right now, I'm a parasite to the ship. How about that for irony?"

Sheppard nodded slowly. "What about the crew?"

The crew. She'd almost forgotten why they were all here. She focused back on the ship's systems and managed to seal every last door. "I've trapped them all inside several sections of the ship. I can guide you to the safest, less populated sections so you can start tagging subjects." She would have to dedicate a subroutine to do that and a few others to scour the rest of the ship's systems to gather as much intel as she could.

"Thanks," Sheppard said. He sounded like he meant it. Maybe now he would trust her. He then turned back to the rest of the team and began barking orders. "Alright, let's split up. Crimson, you're with me. Majestic, you're with Ronon. Apocalypse, stay with Blue Team and hold down the fort, keep her safe."

And with that, half the people in the room left to go their own separate ways. Cortana noticed the HAVOK nukes each one of them was carrying on their backs and remembered that the last stage of the plan was to blow this ship to kingdom comeâ€"not really the best of ideas now that she knew exactly what the ship was. She opened a channel to Hammond using the Hive's own COM system. "Colonel Carter, do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Cortana."

"Once our people are done tagging subjects, we might wanna hold off planting those nukes."

There was a pause on the other end of the transmission. "Why?"

"As it turns out, Precursor Hives have evolved to become massive Flood formsâ€"living, advanced Flood forms. Graveminds."

Another pause. _"Are you serious?"_

"Yeah; I'll give you the details later. What I was thinking is that we could use this one _and_ its crew as test subjects for when we fire Installation 04."

At least a full minute passed before Colonel Carter replied, _"I agree. Could you take it within firing range once we're done here?"_

"Sure. And I suggest you take a few hull samples as well. I'll try to modify them on a molecular level and make them give off a signal so that you can locate and beam them away." That was one of the advantages of a self-regenerating organic ship; you could shape parts of it into whatever you wanted them to be. It took her several minutes, but she eventually managed to separate several man-sized segments of the outer hull, making sure that they would emit a reading that _Hammond_ would be able to pick up; seconds later, the ship's sensors detected the signature of the Asgard transport system snatching them away.

"Good thing we brought some extra containment pods," Carter said.

"Definitelyâ€¦" Cortana replied, but his voice trailed off. One of her subroutines had found something really interesting. She double-checked the data just to make sure. "Oh, my. I think I've figured out how these ships have managed to upgrade their shields and hull. And it has nothing to do with incorporating a Covenant fusion reactor in their designâ€¦at least not entirely."

"Then howâ€¦?"

"That reactor is just a catalyst. If I'm reading these schematics and logs correctly, the Precursors are using some of their captured prisonersâ€¦only the strongest of themâ€¦as hosts for their pathogen. Each one becomes a fusion reactor complete with its own containment chamber, meant to provide the power to grow a basic Hive within a few days. As the Hive keeps building itself around the reactor chamber, it develops a second, more powerful energy source which then becomes the primary source that allows for the upgrades to take place, leaving the fusion reactor only as a secondary source."

"Our sensors were able to detect the energy output given off by the fusion reactor before. They should've been able to detect anything stronger than that."

"Unless the primary power source's chamber is well-shielded against outside scans, such as is the case."

"What kind of energy source are we talking about, anyway?"

"One that makes your ZPMs look like alkaline batteries in comparison. It extracts vacuum energy fromâ€¦"

"â€¦our own universe, making it potentially as powerful as the scope of the universe itself."

Cortana blinked. "You know of this kind of energy source?"

"The Ancients tried to do something similar before. We found a lab in Pegasus, in a world called Doranda, where they'd been working on something they called Project Arcturus. We tried to complete the work they had begun until we realized that new and exotic particles were continuously created and destroyed while extracting energy like that. McKay was unable to power down the device and ended up destroying an entire solar system when it overloaded."

"You will never let me live that down, will you?" That was Doctor McKay. So, he was eavesdropping on the communications between the Hive and _Hammond_. At least the man had found something to keep himself busy with.

"Well, apparently the Precursors have found a way around that issue," Cortana continued.

"It would explain why their ships are so strong now," Colonel Carter said. _"It actually makes a whole lot more sense. I kept wondering how a single nuclear reactor could provide all that power."_

"It also explains why they've only attacked smaller, less populated worlds. They've been focusing on building up their fleets beforeâ€"

Wait. Before what? There was something else going on here. All the data her subroutines were gathering pointed to some kind of larger scheme on the Precursors' part, but she couldn't figure out what it was yet. Or rather, she couldn't _find_ it, almost as ifâ€|

Of course. The Gravemind was trying to hide something from her. _You won't give up so easily, will you?_

She was forced to cut off the transmission and reincorporate all of her subroutines so that she could use all of her mind to dig deeper into the Gravemind's brainâ€the ship's databanks. She suddenly hit a wall, a mental barrier, and a thick one at that. Bringing it down wouldn't be easy, and she couldn't spend much time doing this, at least not until Colonel Sheppard and the assault team were finished doing their job.

She backed off and reopened the COM channel while allowing her subroutines to resume their work. Maybe she didn't need all of the pieces of the puzzle to solve it. "Sorry about that, Colonel Carter. The Gravemind's concealing something from me, so I went and tried to find out what it is."

"Don't worry. As long as you don't lose control of the shipâ€|"

The ship. Ships. Fleets. A large fleet divided into smaller ones. The information came flooding in from several logs detailing the amount of ships that had originally arrived at this galaxy from Pegasus and the amount of ships built since then. But it didn't make any sense; if a single Hive could infect an entire planet, then why build ten times more Hives than there were planets in the galaxy? Unlessâ€|

"Oh, shit."

_ "Now what is it?" _

It was all clear now. This had to be what the Gravemind didn't want her to know. She had her subroutines search for more pieces of information, anything that would help her confirm it. Thereâ€"a log detailing the date and time of departure of the smaller fleets, as well as their exit vector.

By now, Sheppard and the Spartans had finished tagging subjects and were on their way back to the control room, so _Hammond_ and _Daedalus_ should already have their 302 Bays filled with samples. Speed was of the essence. "Colonel Carter, please tell me you have a working hyperdrive."

_ "Yeah, Captain Lasky sent over some Huragok to help me and Colonel Caldwell fixâ€" _

"You need to get back to the Ark, right now!"

_ "Why? What'sâ€"?" _

"No time to explain! Just take those samples back and get the Array ready! _Billions_ of lives depend on it!"

_ "Understood," _ Carter replied hesitantly. _ "We'll send someone to pick you up later, just before we test fire the Halo. _Hammond_ out." _

Cortana used the Hive's outer camerasâ€"more like the Wraith version of camerasâ€"to confirm that both _Hammond_ and _Daedalus_ left the system and felt slightly relieved to know that at least Colonel Carter trusted her judgment when she saw the two SG ships jump away. Meanwhile, Sheppard and the rest of the team were already walking into the room.

"So, if we're not lighting any firecrackers here, we should probably get going," Sheppard said. Cortana couldn't really tell if he'd been monitoring all radio chatter while also taking instructions from her dedicated subroutine or if McKay had brought him up to speed. Frankly, she didn't care.

"You go," the Chief said. "I'll stay here, protect Cortana until they come get us."

That was something she didn't expect. Then again, she and John had been together through a lot. Obviously he wasn't about to leave her behind, especially considering what had happened on the Didact's ships a year ago.

Fred stepped closer to John, followed by Linda and Kelly. "We'll stay with you, Chief."

"Negative," John said. "Get back to the Jumpers."

Fred shook his head. "We're not leaving you here alone. What if Cortana can't keep the ship entirely under control and some of those trapped Flood or Precursors manage to escape and get here? Or worse, what if they do regardless?"

"All the more reason for you to leave."

"All the more reason for us to stay. Don't make me pull rank here, Chief."

John held his gaze for a while; Fred did the same. Finally, the Chief relented, nodding his consent. Everyone else looked at Sheppard and awaited his orders.

"Okay, the rest of us, let's go," Sheppard said. He headed for the doorway, but before leaving, he turned back and said. "Good luck."

Cortana gave him a nod, and the assault team left. Now there was only one thing left to do for her before jumping into hyperspace.

* * *

><p>Dart Bay

****Precursor Hive ship****

****0642 hrs. October 5, 2013****

A beeping noise on his tablet computer made Rodney jump in his chair as he realized that he'd dozed off. He quickly sat back down properly and turned his seat around to look at the screen. Apparently, he had received both a set of coordinates and an encrypted data burst from Cortana. The data packet came with a message that read: "Dr. McKay, I need you to deliver this intel to Captain Lasky ASAP; then tell him to deliver it to Colonel Carter the second he gets back to the Ark. It is of utmost importance that you do as I say. Please, trust me on this."

What theâ€"? Rodney thought but was interrupted by his radio crackling and the sound of gunfire erupting in his ear.

"McKay, Lorne, start 'em up now! We're coming in hot!" Sheppard cried out. And true enough, the gunfire was getting closer and closer by the second. McKay instantly stood up and took the pilot's seat, touching the main panel once to power up the Jumper and grabbing the control stick. He turned to see half of the Spartans rush into the ship's passenger bay with their weapons still aimed outside. Ronon and Sheppard were the last inside, but not before firing a couple of times at two hideous creatures that fell apart in pieces as the bullets from Sheppard's P90 tore through them.

"Go, go, go!" Sheppard shouted as he closed the rear hatch. McKay took off as fast as he could and headed for the closest tunnel. He had to slow down when he reached the first curve, though; he wasn't a skilled pilot, after all. But at least there were no Darts to follow him, as all of them had been destroyed during the space battle.

Sheppard sat down and fixed his gaze on McKay, but that wouldn't make him go any faster. He supposed that he'd rather be the one flying the ship, but until he wasn't outside and left the craft flying on autopilot in a straight line, such a thing was impossible. Thus, Sheppard had no other choice but to wait for a few minutes until he finally reached the exit.

"Cortana, we're clear!" Sheppard yelled on the Jumper's COM and motioned for Rodney to move back to his respective seat. Rodney managed to catch a glimpse of a hyperspace window opening while he and John exchanged places and assumed that the Hive had jumped away as Cortana and Sam had agreed to. "_Infinity_, this is Sheppard. Request permission to come aboard."

"Granted. Bay Seven's clear," Roland replied.

When Sheppard took back the controls, McKay finally felt free to go through the data he'd received. He decompressed the package and began sifting through its contents—and nearly fainted when he realized what it was. He didn't even notice how or when the Jumpers flew into the vowels of _Infinity_ until he felt the ship touch down.

As soon as the hatch opened, he ran outside and yelled at the closest Marine, "I need to talk to the Captain, right away!"

The man frowned but quickly guided him towards the closest lift and escorted him all the way to the bridge. For once, he missed Atlantis' transporters; they were undoubtedly faster than this. He wondered how a human civilization 500 years ahead of his own time could still be using such utterly slow transportation methods.

When he reached the bridge, Captain Lasky turned around and met him with wondering eyes. "Dr. McKay, what is it?"

"Captain, I received an encrypted data burst from Cortana just before we left," Rodney replied and offered him his tablet. "You need to see this."

The Captain took the computer and held it closer to the hologram of the ship's AI. McKay watched as their eyes moved quickly, scanning the information on the tablet's screen. When he was done, Lasky's face had lost all color. "How trustworthy is this intel? It came from a Hive's—a Gravemind's—data banks, after all."

"I'd say from zero to a hundred percent trustworthy?" Rodney replied, earning a scowl from both Lasky and Roland. "Look, no matter where it came from, we have to assume it is true. Would you put it past the Precursors to do this?"

Lasky seemed to ponder McKay's query. Then he opened his lips to say something, but he was cut off by Roland. "Sir, I'm picking up several Hive ships coming out of hyperspace."

A dozen hyperspace windows appeared in front of _Infinity_, a Hive appearing from each. "Probably came here to rendezvous with the one we just hijacked," Lasky thought out loud. "OK, let's go. Lieutenant James, Cole Protocol is in effect. Choose any random vector and get us out of here."

McKay had no idea of what this Cole Protocol was, but if choosing a random exit vector was any indication, he assumed that it was meant to keep the enemy guessing. How effective it would prove against the Precursors, he didn't know, but as the ship tore a hole in subspace and escaped through it, he could only hope that it would be enough. Concern for his own life aside, the intel in his tablet computer needed to reach the Ark no matter what.

* * *

><p>Stargate Operations

Atlantis, the Ark

0753 hrs. October 5, 2013

Sam looked up from the balcony in wonder at the sight of the huge ringworld above her head. Sure, the Ancients were the greatest engineers in her humble opinion, but the Furlingsâ€”the Forerunnersâ€”knew how to take one's breath away with their impossibly grandiose creations. The Ark was capable of building Halos with ease, but someone else had to have built the Ark, which was considerably larger than the gigantic ring-shaped weapons. The mere thought of it astounded her.

That, and the effectiveness and efficacy of their artificial constructs. Just a minute agoâ€”before beaming down to the cityâ€”she'd been watching from the bridge of her ship how swarms of Sentinels retrieved each sample from the fighter bays of both _Hammond_ and _Daedalus_, carrying them away to Installation 04 with the greatest delicacy and care but fast enough to get there in a matter of seconds. Once within the Ring's research facilities, more automated drones would study the captured subjects down to a molecular level under the safest of conditions and then relay the data back to Atlantis where she and Halsey would cross-reference the analyses to find the common element between the Flood and the Hybrids.

Despite the current circumstances, Sam couldn't help the odd feeling of being able to work at her own pace without having to worry about improvising anything because of some unexpected setback or complication. She could count the times she'd been able to work like this with one hand. The last six weeks were a new record for her. But then she remembered how Cortana had told her to get back here right then, and she wondered if this peaceful lull would last for long.

A small light appeared on the sky above and faded almost right away, but not before an object came out of it. Moments later, she heard Lasky's voice say, _"Atlantis, this is _Infinity_ actual, requesting permission to beam down to the city."_

"Permission granted, _Infinity_. Welcome back," Chuck replied. Sam took this as her cue to walk back inside. Lasky appeared in front of the Stargate shortly after his ship's transmission carrying a data pad in his right hand. He looked concerned, to say the least.

"Captain, did Cortana give you the coordinates to where she took the captured Hive?" she asked.

Lasky nodded slowly. "She gave me that, and something else you need to see."

He handed her the data pad, and upon analyzing its contents, Sam realized why the Captain looked so upset. "Oh, my God."

"Carter?" She heard Jack call out from the short gangway that connected Woolsey's office to the operations center. She looked up

but didn't answer nor move from where she stood. Eventually he came down to see what was going on. Sam just gave him the device, her hands shaking uncontrollably. It took Jack only a moment to read it. "Holyâ€¦ buckets," he simply said.

It wasn't really that difficult to understand. The data pad was displaying a map of the UNSC Milky Way, Pegasus, and the other Milky Wayâ€¦ and the amount of Precursor Hive ships that were already in all three galaxies.

The peaceful lull was indeed over.

* * *

><p>AN: Yeah, things are coming to a head. Only four chapters remaining! Do you feel as anxious as I am about it?*

I mentioned on the previous chapter that I didn't really approve much of the ChiefxCortana pairing, but as the story keeps progressing it actually seems quite logic. It certainly gave the scene with the Gravemind an interesting turn. After all, if she managed to defeat it, it was because of her feelings for him. Still, not a shipper, but I respect those who are.

As you can see, I do pay attention to my reviews. A lot of you guys made a fairly good point about Wraith ships being too overpowered (namely the cruiser). I came to realize that you were all right; a fusion reactor, powerful as it may be, still wouldn't have been nearly powerful enough to give a Wraith ship such resilience. However, I needed Wraith shipsâ€¦"sorry, Precursor shipsâ€¦"to be a worthy challenge to both SG ships and _Infinity_ because, well, normal Wraith ships were nothing more than a joke by the end of season 5 of SGA. So, I thought long and hard about a solution for this problem and finally thought, "Well, the Precursors have been around for millions of years, even more than the Ancients themselves, so perhaps they have managed to master something that the Ancients couldn't." And that's when I recalled Project Arcturus. I'm no scientist, so I don't know exactly how the Precursors overcame the 'exotic particles' problem, but they did and that's what matters. I hope you like my solution.**

I'm on vacation this week, but unfortunately that doesn't mean that I'll be able to write a lot 'cause I've got tons of chores to do. Still, the next few chapters are shorter than this one so, theoretically, I might be updating more regularly (or at least not once every month or two). Until then, don't forget to review!

P.S.: For those of you naysayers who argued that **_Hammond_**** couldn't beat ****_Infinity_**** with such ease, Issue #5 of ****_Halo: Escalation_**** proved me right! You can find the evidence on my Facebook page (link on my profile's description). Have a nice day! =)**

20. AN: Hiatus

A/N: This is the kind of thing that I never thought I would do as a fanfiction writer. I've seen it before, and it's not pleasant, but I don't see any other choice.

****This is an apology to you all.****

****In the last few months, I've tried to update at least another chapter, but I haven't been able to do so. It's not because of time but because of an inability to stay focused on one thing at a time. Some of you may already know that I've been writing and posting another story, dedicating a lot of time and effort into it that I should also be giving to this crossover. I haven't stopped writing the last remaining chapters for TFRR, but I just can't finish them. This means I have half-completed chapters which I am not willing to fill with bs just to upload them and be done with it. I don't believe you deserve a mediocre piece of work. ****

****Unfortunately, my head is filled with ideas for both my other story and yet _another_ crossover I want to start writing. I guess it's like a friend of mine (also a fanfiction writer) told me a couple of days ago:****

****_"You ask your brain to give you ideas for new chapters...>It gives you ideas for new fics."****

****So, as much as it pains me to do it, I'm uploading this A/N to let you know that TFRR will be on hiatus for an indefinite amount of time.****

****I know that this is not what you would like to see right now and that you'd rather be reading an entire chapter than this sorry excuse for an apology. But I'm afraid that's all I have to give you right now. I _do_ intend to finish this story, as I would hate to have it join the list of unfinished HaloxSGA crossovers. But I'm just not sure when that's going to happen.****

****I want to thank all of my readers/followers/reviewers for putting up with me to this day. When I first began writing this story, I never expected it to have such an amazing and overall positive response. 246 followers, 195 favorites, and 178 reviews so far. I'm overwhelmed, I truly am. This is why it hurts me to disappoint you like this. I can only hope that you will wait for a while longer to read the ****denouement**** of this story and that you will be please despite the painfully long wait. I'll try my best to finish my other stories ASAP so I can come back and finish what I started.****

****I promise.****

21. Chapter 20: Countdown

****A/N: The long wait is over! After nearly two years of inactivity (really, really, _real-ly_ sorry about that; please do read my not-so-extensive apology below), the next chapter in this story is finally here! Enjoy!****

****(For those who've been following this story since forever... I suggest you reread it from ****the beginning. Just to avoid possible confusion with other crossovers. And thank you for your patience.)**

>

*** * ***

><p>Atlantis conference room
Atlantis, the Ark

>**1524 hrs. December 9, 2558 (Military Calendar)**

The silence in the room was deafening. Everyone was too shocked by the news to produce a single word. How could such a thing have happened without them knowing? Had it not been for this mission, they wouldn't even have learned of this, and two galaxies would've been doomed. Problem was, they were doomed anyway. This galaxy at least had the advantage of a Halo Array, but the other twoâ€|

Eventually, General O'Neill broke the long silence, voicing Lasky's very thoughts. "Assuming this is true, what do we do now? The Array's range falls a little short of the Milky Way and Pegasus, don't you think?"

Mitchell's eyes shone with an idea. "We could try moving Atlantis along with Installation 04, and when it fires, we could dial every single Gate in both galaxies, just like we did with the Dakara device," he suggested, but Sam had begun to shake her head even before he'd finished.

"It won't work. Those are two different networks. And even if we could, we're in another galaxy, remember? We wouldn't have enough power to dial out to so many Gates from a Halo ring."

"Then we dial each network separately," Mitchell said as if it were the most obvious thing to do. Sam shook her head again.

"Again, not enough power. Besides, if we have to choose which galaxy to dial first, we could very well be condemning the other."

Everyone else was deep in thought, but no one suggested anything. The room was so silent everyone could hear Mitchell mutter: "At least I'm proposing solutions."

Lasky remained silent, though he shared Mitchell's frustration. He was no scientist, and even if he were, he would've needed to be brought up to speed on all of the stuff both Colonels were discussing in order to be of assistance. He could say the same of about no less than half the people in the room; such was the disadvantage of not belonging to the same galaxyâ€"or, rather, galaxiesâ€"as these folks. As for the other half who did belong to said galaxies, only a handful of them were scientists, and if they couldn't figure out how to solve thisâ€|

Now he truly understood how the Forerunners might've felt as their war with the Flood progressed. An enemy as insidious as the parasite was simply too hard to defeat. The way it reproduced, the way it grew in numbers in such a short spanâ€| and more importantly, the way it learnedâ€| The sheer amount of Hive ships made it clear that their main goal and objective was to get rid of any space-faring race that could represent a potential threatâ€"if such a race even existed. The Hives probably still lacked enough ground forces per ship to invade and overwhelm a planet, but once the main threat were gone, consuming lesser worlds wouldn't be a problem at all.

The situation was hopeless. But Lasky was yet to learn of the uncanny ability of the Tau'ri to find a solution to even the most impossible

of situations. For as he caught a glimpse of Sam Carter's expression, he could see the beginning of a new plan brewing up inside her head.

"Actually, Cam," she finally said, "there might be a way to do what you propose if we add another Gate network into the equation." Mitchell looked up after hearing this, his face reflecting surprise at first, then a slight hint of pride as he seemed to understand what she meant.

"Another Gate network?" Sully asked—the first time Lasky heard him speak in a very long while.

Sam nodded and turned to Halsey before adding, "I'm going to need Cortana's help to make it work, though."

"And before that, we need to complete our work with those samples so that we can retrieve her from the Hive," she concluded.

Lasky was still waiting to hear of this new plan, surely like everyone else in the room—except General O'Neill who simply said, "Then what are you two waiting for? You're dismissed."

And without hesitation, both women jumped from their chairs and left the room in a hurry, effectively concluding the meeting. Confusion reigned among those who remained, however, and aside from three other people—Mitchell, McKay, and Sheppard—who trailed behind the women right away, it was a while before everyone else followed suit, resigned to having to wait a while longer to hear the details of Carter's plan. The only ones who remained in the room were Woolsey, General O'Neill, Lord Hood, and Lasky, and as the latter stood to leave, he gathered the courage to ask.

"Um, General, if I may," he began, pausing just for a moment to collect his thoughts, "what do you think Colonel Carter meant with 'another Gate network'? Could there really be another network that would suit our purposes?"

He noticed that Woolsey and Lord Hood both turned to look at O'Neill at the same time when he asked that question, both men obviously wanting to hear the answer. The General, meanwhile, just grinned and patted Lasky on the shoulder. "If I knew myself, Tom."

Lasky frowned. Not because O'Neill had called him by his first name. He tended to do that from time to time. What was bothering him was that, for some reason, and despite the fact that the General looked as dumbfounded as everyone else, he also seemed to have at least an inkling of what was going on. So, why wouldn't he share what he knew with everyone else? Weren't they allies, after all? The man wasn't exactly the trusting type, but he was acting very warily now.

Eventually, he nodded and saluted. And as he walked out of the room, he decided that he was overreacting. Maybe O'Neill was just keeping things on a need-to-know basis. Surely once those doors closed, he would share his theory with Woolsey and Lord Hood.

But just before those doors closed, he saw a faint shimmer close by and spotted a tall humanoid shape—or at least he thought it was a humanoid shape—entering the conference room. His heart sank in his

chest. A Sangheili spy? He shook his head. He must be imagining things. Why would Halsey have spies in Atlantis? Could she even be able to bring them here without drawing suspicions? Nah, his mind had to be playing tricks on him.

During the short trip back to his quarters, though, his paranoia just increased. He kept looking behind his back more often than not, not once seeing anything out of the ordinary but still unable to shake the feeling that something was pursuing him. His demeanor earned him several puzzled looks from people walking through the hallways, but he didn't care. He reached the nearest transporter, activated it, and covered the short distance between it and his quarters in a sprint as soon as the doors opened. When he got there, he locked the doors and rested against them, sliding down until he was sitting on the floor.

After the Covenant attack at Circinius-IV, there were very few things that could faze Thomas Lasky. The fear he'd felt that night had turned to a perpetual rage and hatred against the genocidal alien collective. Not even the hulking, ugly Prometheans had managed to scare him when he first saw them. But for some reason, those few minutes from the conference room to his quarters felt like Corbulo all over again. He tried to pull himself together. Maybe his paranoia was just that, the result of all the stress from the last few days. For instance, the battle against the Hive had been a royal pain, and he didn't even want to imagine what it would've been like if it had been a _fleet_ of Hives. Fighting against the Floodâ€"well, the Precursor-Flood hybridsâ€"could do that to anyoneâ€"right?

Regardless of the cause, it was a couple of hours before that sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach faded away. Only then did he pick up his COMM pad to contact Roland and asked him to beam him back to _Infinity_. The funny tingling in his body was a welcome sensation, and the change of view from a nicely decorated guest room to the bridge of the mighty warship encouraged him. This ship was like home, a place where he felt safe and secure. Nothing, not even an army of Promethean and Covenant forces, could harm him here.

But he was just fooling himself. His anxiety hadn't vanished, and he knew it. It was just dormant, waiting to be triggered again at any moment. Worse, Lasky could only wonder _what_ would trigger it and how badly it would affect him. Would he be able to keep it together during the next crisis? Or would the people under his command pay the price if he couldn't handle it?

He took a hand to his chest, feeling the dog tags and the small stone beneath his uniform. He needed to push those thoughts and doubts aside. He _had to_ be the leader he'd learned to be. And he would, come what may.

Even if that meant going down swinging.

* * *

><p>Atlantis, the Ark
****2311 hrs. December ****9****,
2558 (Military Calendar)**

"Jackpot."

Out of the corner of her eye, Halsey saw Sam doing a double take at her and approaching the screen displaying the relevant data. She took a few moments to read the information, probably rereading it a couple of times to make sure that it was legit and reliable. A faint, hopeful smile appeared in her face.

"That's it. This is what we've been looking forâ€”a molecular chain unique to the Flood and the Precursor Hybrids. We actually found it."

"Well, you've got to give credit to the Forerunners. They actually did most of the job."

"No kidding. They were so close," Sam said in a whisper.

While Sam went over the data one more time, Halsey got lost in thought. She couldn't stop thinking of what could've happened if her galaxy, and ultimately, Tau'ri and Lanteaâ€”which were the names Halsey had chosen to refer to their allies' Milky Way and Pegasus galaxiesâ€”if only the Forerunners had had more time to figure out and enact the solution to the Flood problem. They had managed to catalog virtually every race in the Milky Way, thanks to the Librarian's work. Had they found what Halsey and Sam had just foundâ€”|

Of course, what they had achieved was really just the conclusion of what the Forerunners had begun. Most of the samples retrieved from the Hive ship had simply served to confirm the validity of the very first samples collected 100,000 years before. The rest only helped to 'fill in the blanks', so to speak.

The Precursors plan to invade the other two galaxies would've proven to be a serious setback to the current plan against them, had Sam not found a complete record of DNA samples for every living, sentient species in both galaxiesâ€”no doubt courtesy of the time-traveling Alteran Janus, who probably had anticipated this very scenario and many others and acted accordingly.

That line of thought brought Halsey to yet another questionâ€”one that she'd been considering for a while. She'd just been unable to find the right moment to ask it out loud, until now. "Doesn't it bother you, knowing that your actions have been predetermined and shaped down to the last detail by someone else?"

Halsey's question carried enough weight to capture Sam's undivided attention. The UNSC scientist looked directly into the blonde's eyes as she continued. "I mean, look at youâ€”a devoted scientist and expert in astrophysics and alien tech with a high-ranking position in the military. How often do you hear of scientists in the military, let alone with such authority? And all those DNA samples you found in the Ancient database? We both know there is only one Ancient who could've thought of doing that, but even then, how could he have been certain that you'd find them?"

Sam sighed heavily as soon as Halsey finished speaking. That elicited a frown of curiosity from Halsey. Had the SGC scientist been pondering about that very same question already?

"Look," the younger woman eventually spoke. "I don't mean to sound disrespectful, because I know you people have been dealing with

aliens and alien technology for at least twice as long as we have, but the truth is you are still amateurs." Halsey glared at Sam. "Forgive me if that sounds blunt, but trust me, one's perspective of things changes when you start experiencing things like dimension shifting or alternate realities. I don't suppose you've met another version of yourself?"

"And I assume you have."

"As a matter of fact, yeah, several times."

That took Halsey off-guard. Her frown vanished. Both scientists had had more than enough time to engage in this kind of banter during the last month, but while they'd already discussed dimension shifting and 'out-of-phase' experiences, this particular topic was news to her. Was there really a way to meet people from an actual alternate universe? "How?" she couldn't help but ask.

"Wellâ€¦ technically, Daniel was the first one to visit an alternate reality and meet other versions of us. About a year later, I got a chance to meet an alternate firsthand. Both times, it was thanks to an Ancient device called the Quantum Mirror. Then there was that time when we ended up with 17 different SG-1's. Boy, that was thrilling, working with so many other versions of myâ€¦"

"I'd like to think you're getting somewhere with all this," Halsey interrupted.

Sam stared at her with that apologetic look she usually had when she realized that she was getting sidetracked. She cleared her throat. "Like I said, it's a matter of perspective. There is only one thing in particular between me and every alternate I've met: we're all astrophysicists. Aside from that, each and every one of us is different and so unique. Each alternate has made her own decisions and had her own mistakes, achievements, and experiences. The fact that we all share the same basic scientific knowledge may be an indication that the Allianceâ€¦or rather, alternate Alliancesâ€¦did the same thing to all of us in our respective universes, possibly in billions of other universes. Even then, nothing else is written. Each of us decides what to do with what we've been given.

"So I don't care what a bunch of old records say. This geas I'm supposedly imprinted with doesn't make me who I am. It may be guiding some of my decisions, and yeah, it may be what's given me such an ability to easily understand things that others can't, but it doesn't define me. The very core of my beingâ€¦my soul? That's mine, and mine alone. It is my essence, and that is what's shaped me into what I am today, not some genetic marker."

Halsey remained silent for a moment. Then she snorted amusedly. "You almost don't sound like an astrophysicist."

"I know. Sometimes I surprise even myself when I speak," Sam admitted softly, looking at her feet as if she were ashamed of it.

Several minutes of awkward silence followed that sentence, during which Sam turned to study the screen again while Halsey just stood there, deep in thought. Sam's babble about alternates had got her wondering. How many differences could there be between Halsey's own alternates? Could it be possible that somewhere out there, in another

universe, she had done things way more differently? That another Halsey had avoided cloning childrenâ€”and thus avoided the very charges for which she was imprisoned in this universe?

If that were the case, that Halsey wouldn't have been treated like scum during and after the events on Requiem, which in turn would mean that she would still be with the UNSC and that humanity would've gained access to the Key and all the trove it led to. But more importantly, she would've been present when John reappeared to save the day. She would've been able to be there for him when he lost Cortana, or maybe even fix her before she chose to sacrifice herself.

On the other hand, though, there could as easily be another Halsey in another reality who had gone down the same dark path she almost hadâ€”a Halsey that could've used the Key to acquire what she needed to exact revenge on the UNSC, ONI, and the rest of humanity. The very thought sent shivers down her spine. Could that Halsey even have a chance at redemption anymore?

She shook her head. Such thoughts were of little consequence right now. Stopping the Hybrids was all that mattered. "Well, we've got what we needed. Let's spread the word, get everyone else to evac the Ark while we test-fire the ring."

But just as she neared one of the Lantean consoles to give the city-wide announcement, Sam put a hand on her shoulder. "Actually, why don't you let me handle that while you and your crew go pick Cortana and Blue Team up?"

Halsey turned to look at Sam with a raised eyebrow. "I thought Infinity would be taking care of that."

"Yeahâ€¦ I'm afraid I'm going to need Captain Lasky to run a small errand for me."

An errand? the older woman wondered. Then she recalled the detour Sam had taken to the Citadel after leaving the conference room while Halsey began working on the samples. And she understood. "Does it have something to do with whatever you're having the Foundry build for you?"

"Yep," Sam replied somewhat excitedly.

"Will you tell me what it is?"

"Hopefully, by the time you get back, it will be ready."

Halsey didn't mind the secrecy. She knew that Sam was just doing it to make the surprise worth the while. Still, something didn't add up with the Colonel's request. "I don't mean to be rude, but why not send any of your people?" she voiced her thoughts. "You know a Covenant cruiser isn't nearly as fast as your ships. It would take us longer to get there, and if John and the others are in troubleâ€”"

"Not if you use your hyperdrive instead of your slipspace drive."

That took Halsey aback. Sam knew?

The astrophysicist smirked after a few moments, and Halsey realized her blunder. Her silence when faced with this statement had probably confirmed what was probably just a thought or a theory for Sam. But what shocked the older woman the most was that Sam's voice didn't carry an accusing tone at all. If anything, she was even staring at her with a knowing look. Almost as if she'd expected Halsey to overhaul her Covenant ship with Cortana's help. Though given Sam's knowledge of Replicator abilities, Halsey should've probably expected that to happen eventually.

For a moment, she wondered whether Sam was testing her—seeing if, despite keeping the secret, Halsey wasn't working on her own agenda as usual. She feared that she would expose her and get her imprisoned yet again. That gaze, however, didn't waver. Then Halsey understood that Sam actually trusted her. She couldn't believe it. She'd somehow earned back her trust, something that meant the world to her.

"I, uh— I might— need a couple of containment pods, just in case," she said, slowly recovering from her stupor after a full minute of silence.

"I'll have a few Sentinels take them to your ship. They should also be of use for you."

Halsey still couldn't believe Sam was acting so casually, almost like they had been lifelong allies and friends. But if she was willing to give her a second chance— "You sure you'll be able to reconfigure the Array's settings on your own?"

"Don't worry. You've already taught me plenty of Forerunner systems."

That I did, Halsey thought. Though in all honesty, she had to give Sam credit, too. The blonde was not only a quick learner but a skilled scientist as well, more than anyone else in the UNSC—probably more than everyone in the UNSC combined. "Fine. I'll get going right away," she said, walking up to a table on the far end of the room and grabbing the data pad she kept there.

"Okay. Good luck," Sam replied, stepping in front of the same Ancient console Halsey had attempted to use. And as if to assert her trust in Halsey even more, she added while Halsey made a beeline for the exit, "Don't forget to lower your shields before you beam them out of the Hive."

Halsey stopped right in front of the threshold after hearing this and spun around. Still Sam kept smirking knowingly. Halsey chuckled softly. She'd thought of going to a less populated sector of the city, picking a spot that would preferably have no surveillance, and request her crew to beam her back aboard Luminous Truth. But if Sam knew, well, why not do it here already?

She nodded at Sam just before turning off her holographic disguise, and as the lab coat was replaced by the armor, the latter nodded back reassuringly. Halsey then reactivated her suit's COM systems to call her Sangheili protégé. "Nal, come in."

Receiving no response, she repeated her hail. This time, it only took

a few seconds before she got a reply. "_I'm here, Shipmistress_. And may I say how good it is to hear your voice once more__."_"

"Likewise. I assume Cortana taught you all the basics of our new upgrades?"

"_She did indeed."_"

"Good. Get ready to beam me back aboard _Luminous Truth_."

"_You're finally coming back?_" The excitement and joy in her voice were evident.

"I am."

"_Right away, Shipmistress."_" The COM link went dead. Not five seconds later, Halsey felt that funny tingling in the pit of her stomach she'd only felt three times before. Sam was already giving the announcement, and her voice echoing throughout the hallways was the last thing she heard before being whisked away from the room and the Ancient city.

When the white light faded, she found herself in the control center of her ship, surrounded by her Elitesâ€"her new family. In a way, she was home again. She couldn't help a smile, and she was almost certain several Sangheili were doing the closest thing they could to that same gesture.

The Shipmaster approached her and saluted in the Sangheili way she'd come to miss in the last few weeks. "Welcome back, Shipmistress. What would you have your servants do?"

"Ready the ship for hyperspace travel as fast as you can," Halsey commanded without delay, despite being deep in ecstasy. "Colonel Carter should be sending us a detachment of Sentinels with containment pods any moment now. As soon as they are aboard, take us to these coordinates."

Her excitement grew as the warrior aliens saluted again and voiced their agreement. She walked up the ramp towards the center of the raised platform, her crew moving all over the place as they prepped the ship for the hyperspace jump. She received confirmation of the Sentinels arrival less than three minutes later, and within moments after that, _Luminous Truth_ entered the hole it tore in subspaceâ€"which surprisingly didn't feel that different from the familiar queasy jolt of entering slipspace she was used toâ€"and began its trip.

The exuberance didn't last, though. As the ship moved forward through the endless blue-white tunnel, she recalled the words the Librarian had spoken to her only a few weeks back when she and the Didact appeared to warn them all of the Precursor threatâ€"and hoped against all hope that their meaning wouldn't be what she feared it was. She knew she had to atone for all her mistakes, and she was ready to accept whatever punishment she deserved. But if she were to pay the ultimate priceâ€"Could she really do it, now that she'd apparently regained some degree of respect and trust from at least one of her own kind?

"Shipmistress, are you alright?" she heard Nal's voice behind her.

Halsey blinked a couple of times as she focused back on the task at hand. This would be the hour when sheâ€”and her Elitesâ€”would truly prove themselves as worthy allies. She had to inspire courage and confidence in her crew. So, she took a deep breath, pushed her fears and doubts aside, and replied as stoically as possible, "I'm fine, Nal. Thanks."

* * *

><p>Control room
Captured Precursor Hive ship

>**0029 hrs. December 1****0****, 2558 (Military Calendar)**

"_SUBMIT! End your torment and my own!"_

The thundering voice echoed throughout the shipâ€”followed by the crackling sound of automatic and energy weapons fire down the hallway. The Master Chief immediately radioed his team. "Blue Team, status?"

"_Hybrids, about a dozen of them___,"_ Kelly replied. The sound of a Wraith Handblaster and a Battle Rifle being fired repeatedly almost muffled her next sentence. _"I'm not sure we can keep this up for much longer. We're almost out of ammo, and these energy weapons can only do so much."_

About nine hours had passed since Cortana had taken the ship to their current coordinates. After their arrival, things had been rather uneventful. But only three hours ago, one of the doors she'd kept sealed suddenly opened, and through it, a small group of Flood forms escaped and headed to the control room. Blue Team had managed to gun them down easily. But then, another door openedâ€”and anotherâ€”and another. Soon, all kinds of Flood forms and Hybrids were charging towards the control roomâ€”and just as soon, the Spartans' Particle Magnums ran out of ammo in their attempt to fend off the assault. Cortana was then forced to admit that she was starting to lose control again, and that it was taking all of her concentration just to keep the Gravemind at bay. Anytime a door opened meant that she'd gotten distracted, even if it had been for just a microsecond.

So, John hadn't spoken to her in a while, focusing instead in keeping her safe. Not an easy task when your strongest weapons were finally dry, but the Spartans had an advantage: their ability to find creative solutions to problems. The 'ship' seemed to be aware of the Spartans' energy guns running out of juice, and whereas the first few waves of Flood forms had been standard Combat Forms, the ones that followed were mostly Pure Forms and Precursor Hybrids. By then, however, Kelly and John had already retrieved any Wraith weapons the first attackers had been carrying. They were quite helpful in slowing down Pure Forms and taking down Hybrids' personal shields while Fred and Linda delivered the killing blows. And when Fred's DMR and Linda's Sniper Rifle also ran out of ammo, they still were able to use Kelly's Battle Rifle and John's Assault Rifle, with Kelly firing the Wraith stunners.

John, meanwhile, had returned a few minutes ago to keep an eye on

Cortana. And as he looked at her, he reminisced of their fight against the Didact of how anguished he'd been, thinking that his companion wouldn't be able to survive before they could return to Earth. Yet not even then had he been as worried as he was now. He wasn't ready to lose her again. He'd rather sacrifice himself protecting her than let her die a second time. But as long as she remained linked to the ship, there was nothing he could do. It was her fight, and she'd have to do it on her own. And even though she had shown remarkable strength so far, he feared that she wouldn't be able to last much longer—especially if he and his team were unable to protect her.

The Chief understood what his teammates were saying. Their attackers—the ones that could carry guns, anyway—had kept using stunners. No Covenant weapons at all, nothing that could inflict actual damage—in short, nothing that could be used against them. And once their remaining weapons ran out of ammo, the Spartans wouldn't have anything else to strike back. Unless their allies arrived to extract them within the next ten minutes—

"Spartans, this is Shipmaster Lon 'Xaka of the cruiser Luminous Truth, the COM channel suddenly crackled. "Are you and your companion ready for extraction?"

John hesitated for a moment. Were it not for his training, he would've burst in laughter at the timing. However, something else gave him pause. Luminous Truth? Wasn't that the Covenant cruiser that had been looming over the Ark for about a month now? Had the brass finally decided to rely on them for this mission? He wondered what that meant for the other ships. Could the damage they had sustained during the battle been that extensive as to have the need to send Halsey's Elites? And in any case, would Covenant craft, manpower, and firepower be enough to cut through the enemy lines and secure them passage out of the ship?

"Cortana is still connected to the Hive ship's systems. If she lets go of it right now, she'll lose control of the ship and we'll be trapped inside," the Chief replied eventually. "Do you have enough forces to help us shoot our way out when that happens?"

"There is no need for that, John. We can beam you out of there, provided that Cortana can keep the Hive's shields and jamming systems offline at least for a few more seconds after she disconnects herself from it."

That was Dr. Halsey's voice. But whereas that voice used to be reassuring years ago, John had mixed feelings about it now, given her current stance with the UNSC. And what was this talk about her cruiser being equipped with beaming technology? He was well aware that the Sangheili ship hadn't yet received such an upgrade, for obvious reasons. How had she obtained it? When had she obtained it? Because unless she'd received it within the last few hours—the only other way she could've outfitted her ship with that technology was if she'd stolen it from the Hammond's Asgard Core. And if that was the case, it would certainly not help her current—

Another burst of gunfire outside the control room was enough to remind the Chief what was at stake. At the very least, and unlike the Flood, Halsey wouldn't try to kill the Spartans where they stood. But more than that, the Spartans' surrogate mother had been working hard

for over a month to earn back the trust of everyone around her and prove that she'd changed. And John still hadn't forgotten how Dr. Jackson had stood up for Halsey so fervently more than one, nor what the Librarian had said about her. Their words had been enough to restore their faith in Halsey somewhat. Perhaps it was time to actually prove it to her.

"Understood," he said at last. Then he radioed his teammates. "Hold the line, Blue Team. We're almost home."

"_Consider it done!"_ Linda shouted over the cacophony of weapons fire.

Satisfied with that response—and hoping that this last wave wouldn't be enough to defeat the Spartans—John approached the AI and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Cortana, let go of it," he spoke softly to her. "Our rescue party has arrived."

Cortana surely knew that. She had to be monitoring every possible COM channel via the Hive ship's systems, yet she showed no immediate reaction to this statement. For a moment, John wondered whether she had even heard him, until she stirred slightly and half-opened her eyes. She turned to look at him with hopeful eyes, to which the Chief only nodded reassuringly. She smiled ever so slightly then closed her eyes again, frowning, as if she were concentrating in doing exactly what Halsey had requested. Finally, she exhaled and pulled her hands out of the control gauntlets. She looked as if she were about to pass out.

"We're ready, beam us out," the Chief immediately contacted Halsey's cruiser. Instantly, a bright light engulfed both him and Cortana. He felt nothing more than a mild tingling, but as soon as the flash faded, it was clear that he had been moved elsewhere. The deserted Wraith control room had been replaced by the bridge of a Covenant _CCS_-class cruiser crawling with Elites, Sentinels—and the only other human aboard, clad in armor, who was tending to a Flood containment pod at the base of the elevated platform in the middle of the room. The Chief turned around and saw all three members of his team standing behind him—but Cortana was nowhere to be seen.

"Scan her for any leftover Flood cells or spores," Halsey ordered the Forerunner machines, and as they carried the pod away, John realized that Cortana had been beamed inside of it. That put his mind at ease. Everyone had made it out of there alive. Their mission was accomplished.

Once the Sentinels were gone and Halsey instructed one of her Elites to 'deactivate the cloak and raise the shields', she approached Blue Team and asked: "Spartans, are you okay?"

"Down to our last mags, as a matter of fact," Fred said, evidently relieved to be out of their embroilment. "Nice timing, Doctor."

Kelly and Linda also nodded their thanks, but before John could do the same, he became aware of something. "Why aren't we jumping back into slipspace?" he asked.

For the brief moment in which Halsey locked her eyes at him, John feared his tone had sounded too aggressive—which had certainly not

been his intention. He just wanted to know why the ship was still in a potential combat zone. Then the elderly woman smiled. "Hyperspace. This ship's hyperspace-capable now," she corrected. John took notice of this remark and added it to the apparent list of Asgard upgrades this cruiser had received. But before he could ponder about it any further, Halsey continued. "Colonel Carter's ready to test-fire Halo. I wanted to make sure that it works." Then, to another one of her Elites: "Nal, have you been able to contact the Ark yet?"

The Sangheili—a female from the looks of it, probably the same one John had seen aboard the Hammond during Blue Team's assault of the ship—took a moment to analyze the holographic screen in front of her before replying, "We've just received confirmation. The Ring's charging sequence was initiated five minutes ago. It should fire any moment soon."

"Good. Thank you," Halsey said, walking up the platform's ramp.

That exchange was enough to put John's lingering doubts to rest. Halsey was still in league with the UNSC/SG alliance. This was a sanctioned rescue. And the Halo Array was likely finally ready to be used against the Precursors and the Flood—'likely' being the key word here. After all, a test-firing always involved an experimental stage that could still present risks. Most of the Sangheili actually seemed nervous as they moved about, despite their best efforts to conceal it. Even John, who had only seen a Halo fire once—and even then, the Ring's pulse wave hadn't been able to reach too far before the half-built Installation collapsed and exploded—had to admit he was slightly unnerved, since he had no idea what to expect.

But not Doctor Halsey. The woman seemed as confident as ever. Not even when one of the crew members announced that the cruiser's long-range sensors were picking up an energy reading coming their way—and fast—did she lose her calmness. She just stood there, betraying no emotion, staring at the four main holo-displays before her as they brought up a live feed of the Hive ship. Soon, every eye in the control room had turned to look at the same thing. The Chief wondered whether it would feel like the shockwave of an explosion or if they would feel anything at all.

So focused was he in the images of the Hive ship and his own thoughts that he didn't even notice when the pulse wave hit the Covenant cruiser. Only thanks to his heightened senses was he able to get a look at the effect it had on the enemy spacecraft. It didn't explode, didn't break apart in large chunks. It was there a moment, and the next, all there was left was a massive amount of purplish dust that the wave immediately dispersed. Then, silence. No one in the spacious room moved or spoke for a very long while, almost as if everyone present still expected something else to happen.

"It's done. We made it," Halsey announced unceremoniously after what felt like an eternity. Even then, the Elites—who, John knew, tended to celebrate almost any victory with loud roars and raised fists—remained absolutely still until the doctor ordered: "Take us back to the Ark."

Slowly, the Sangheili started to react to this command and resumed their respective duties. Before long, the darkness of the intergalactic void shown in the holo-display was replaced by the brightness of hyperspace. Halsey waited a moment before she turned

around, walked down from the platform, and quietly moved past Blue Team towards the doorway behind the Chief, to the right. As the doors parted, however, she stopped and looked back.

"Spartans, do you have a moment?" she said in the same manner she used to back at Reach, discreetly beckoning them as well. The supersoldiers obediently followed her to the corridor without hesitation, just as they used to so many years ago. When the doors closed, however, Halsey dropped the façade of stoicism and started to take heavy breaths, looking everywhere but at the Spartans. She opened and closed her mouth several times, as if trying to find the right words for whatever it was she had to say to them.

"Listen," she said eventually, "I've been cooped up in that Citadel for over a month now, and before that I spent several months in hiding among Jul 'Mdama's ranks"and before that, I was left to rot in an ONI prison cell for five years, and" She paused, probably realizing that she'd started talking very fast. She took another deep breath. "The point I'm trying to make," she continued more slowly, "is that I don't know what's in store for me once this is all over. But come what may, I fear we won't get another chance at this, so" She approached them with weary steps and watery eyes, putting her right hand on each of the Spartans' chest as she spoke. "John" Fred" Linda" Kelly" I wanted to apologize. For" for everything I've ever done to you."

Linda shook her head. "Doctor" "

"Please, just let me speak," Halsey pleaded, trying to hold back the tears. "What I did to you was inhumane. I snatched you away from your families while you were still too young to choose for yourselves. I stole your lives and condemned you to a lifetime of pain and suffering. I stripped you from everything you should've had a right to enjoy"a family of your own, love, happiness" I just" She paused, composing herself. At this point, she was on the verge of crying and looked older and more tired than ever. Moreover, there was genuine regret and pain in her voice. She looked away for a second before continuing. "I don't expect you to forgive me, and I wouldn't be surprised if you hate me. I just had to tell you that I'm sorry, for everything."

None of the Spartans spoke at first, instead looking at each other behind their polarized visors. Then, one by one, they removed their helmets and made a circle around Halsey who now had her head bowed and her eyes closed. They didn't embrace her, but they did put a hand each on both the doctor's shoulders. Kelly was the first one to speak. "We don't hate you. We never have. We've always thought of you as our mother, and we understand why you did what you had to do."

"You are our family, Doctor," Linda said. "Always have been, always will be."

"But" Halsey began amid suppressed sobs.

"Don't," Linda interrupted her. "We're proud of you, of what you've done. We never stopped believing in you."

"Though we were really close," Fred added somewhat jokingly.

"Just don't dwell on the past anymore," Kelly said, dismissing her comrade's comment. "And please, don't let the opinion of Admiral Osman and ONI affect you anymore."

Halsey took a hand to her face and wiped away what few tears had been able to roll down her cheeks. "I don't blame her for being utterly mad at me. She probably has more right to it than anyone else."

"Doctor," John said, "whatever you did before, no one has a right to hate you. Not even her."

Halsey lifted her head slowly and looked at each Spartan in the eye. She looked relieved, like a heavy weight had been lifted off her shoulders. "Thank you," she said in a soft, quivery voice. "Thank you all. It means a lot to me, more than you'll ever know." Then, after taking a moment to collect herself, she took her right hand to her prosthetic arm and pressed a button. A small lid opened and gave way to a hidden compartment from which she took two similarly looking devices. She offered them to the Chief and said, "John, I may need you to do something for me."

John analyzed the two artifacts in the doctor's hand—and recognized them from the Requiem mission reports. Regardless, he took them and asked, "What's this?"

"This is the Librarian's gift to the Fifth Race. It's called the Janus Key. When put together and taken to a place called the Absolute Record, it grants access to the real-time location of every piece of Forerunner tech in the galaxy. Like its name suggests, the Ancient Janus had a considerable part in its creation." She paused, her eyes staring at a distant horizon that wasn't really there. "At first, I thought that, by giving it to me on Requiem, she'd placed some kind of genetic marker that would allow me—and no one else—to use it—but I'm now convinced that such marker is nothing more than the same ATA gene required to operate Ancient technology, including that key. So, I guess I'm not necessarily the only one who can use it," she concluded.

John stared again at the two halves of the Key. He was aware of how Jul 'Mdama had taken one of them and of how Halsey had allegedly reacquired the second half for him. 'Allegedly', because in truth she'd planned to use the artifact for her own purposes all along. Yet now, she was giving it away, basically renouncing to whatever Forerunner trove it granted access to—and thus making it clear that she wouldn't run away again. If that wasn't enough to prove that she'd changed—

Still, something didn't add up. If this artifact was so important—
"Why are you giving this to me?"

"Because you're the only human I trust to do the right thing with it," Halsey said. "You've always made the right call. That's how I know you'll keep it safe until the right time and that you'll give it to the right people when that time comes."

The Master Chief was smart, and in the past, he could usually follow up with the doctor or Cortana whenever they tried to explain him something complicated. With so many 'rights', however, she had lost him—and the rest of Blue Team, from the looks of it. "What's that

supposed to mean?"

Halsey smiled. "You'll know," she said as she half-turned away. "In time, you'll just know."

And with that, she walked down the corridor and disappeared behind another door, leaving behind a priceless Forerunner artifact and four confused Spartans.

* * *

><p>In hyperspace, en route to the Ark
*_**Luminous Truth*_**
>*_**0137 hrs. December 1****0****, 2558 (Military Calendar)*_**

"_You will have to forgive me for leaving you in this state. If only there were a safer way to cure youâ€|"_

_Cortana read between lines as the Librarian spoke those wordsâ€"and understood something. "You meanâ€| there _are_ other ways?"_

The Librarian nodded but hesitated. "Near the end of the war with the Flood, rumors began spreading," she said eventually. "They told of a place, a hidden Forerunner world that still hadn't fallen to the parasite. If it escaped its onslaught, it could potentially cure youâ€| but there are risks."

"_Risks?" the AI parroted._

"_To reach this world, you would have to enter what remains of the Domainâ€| and corrupted as it already is, such a course of action might only damage you furtherâ€|"_

A funny tingling that went from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet woke Cortana from her blissful sleep. The first thing her eyes registered was a brief, bright flashâ€"a beam of light that bathed her entire body. A _Sentinel_ scanning beam. It took her a moment to remember what had happened between disconnecting from the Wraith Hive and now. She'd been placed in a Flood containment pod.

"Hello, Cortana," she heard the voice of her creator outside. The scanning beam shut down, and indeed, there she was, staring at her through the transparent Forerunner metal. "You okay?"

"Peachy, thank you," she replied sarcastically, if only to tease Halsey like she used to occasionally back in the day.

Halsey chuckled. "Sorry about all this," she began, but Cortana waved her hand to dismiss the comment.

"Don't mention it," she said, more seriously now. "It was necessary. I would've asked for it, anyway. And I _am_ fine, so don't worry."

Halsey pursed her lips and gave her a soft smile. Then as the Sentinel began scanning her again, Cortana heard her say, "Rumor has it that you had a round with a Gravemind."

"Yeahâ€¦" the AI replied, groaning. If she could have headaches, she'd definitely have the worst right now. "Not one of my favorite moments ever."

"But you beat it. You managed to do something that not even Forerunner AIs were able to do."

There was admiration in Halsey's voice. That wasn't a first, but it certainly was the first time in a long while that she heard such a thing from the doctor. Part of Cortana wanted to brag about it, but she couldn't. Mostly because there were many outside factors that had helped her. "I did have a previous bad experience with another Gravemind," she admitted. "Guess it worked as a sort of training for this time. But I must also admit that having this Replicator body was a huge advantage. Which reminds me," she added, doing her best to sound as her usual witty self, "that I never really thanked you for bringing me back."

The beam shut down again, and the pod opened. A wrinkly hand reached inside and caressed Cortana's face in a rather loving way. "You know I lost Miranda. I couldn't bear to lose you too," Halsey said tenderly. She then pulled back and offered the same hand to help Cortana out of the pod. As the latter stood, the older woman added with a different tone, "Besides, I couldn't let the opportunity of having the most brilliant AI ever created on my side pass."

"Always so objective," Cortana said, smirking.

Halsey smiled amusedlyâ€"but only for a moment. Then, her countenance changed drastically. Cortana tilted her head. What was that etched on her creator's face? Guilt? Sadness? Dread? Orâ€¦ maybe a combination of both?

"Walk with me," Halsey said, this time offering her arm like someone would to help an elderly woman cross the street. Cortana raised an eyebrow at the irony of the reversed roles but accepted the gesture anyway. Halsey led her out of the room and through the serpentine corridors of the Sangheili ship without an apparent destination.

None of them spoke for several minutes, during which the AI took the time to admire the work she'd accomplished with this old Covenant bathtub. Most of it used to be a mess of exposed plasma circuits and patchwork repairs when Halsey escaped from the Ark weeks earlier. Restoring it with so few raw materials available at the time would've seemed impossible without Huragok aboard, but Cortana had made it possible. It had taken her over a month, sure, and she basically_ had_ to sacrifice small sections of the shipâ€"such as cargo bays, armories, and crew quartersâ€"and turn them into cavernous spaces larger than the hangar bays. But she'd made it possible. And, modesty aside, it was a hell of a job well done.

As she felt the deceleration of the ship exiting slipspaceâ€"hyperspace, she mentally correctedâ€"she thought of the question that remained: _Who would use this ship from now on?_ Cortana knew that Halsey would turn herself in once this was all over. So, would the ship remain in Sangheili hands or become UNSC property? And if the Elites kept the ship, would it be used against Jul 'Mdama or the Arbiter? What did the future have in store for _Luminous Truth_ and its crew?

"I want you to look after John," Halsey suddenly broke the silence. Cortana heard the words loud and clear, but it took her a moment to understand them. She turned to look at her creator. "You're the closest thing he's ever had to an intimate companion, if you catch my drift," she explained.

Cortana frowned. "Hard not to. But why?"

"Just promise me that you will," Halsey cut her off. "Please."

Cortana didn't know what to say. She wasn't even sure whether the UNSC would let her stay with John and assist him in this form, let alone in the way Halsey was asking of her. But her creator's words carried a desperate plea she couldn't ignore.

"I promise," she replied after a long pause. She didn't know how, but she'd make damn sure she kept that promise, too.

Halsey gazed at her, scanned her face for any trace of doubt and finding none, smiled. "Thank you."

Cortana nodded and smiled as well. Only then did she take notice of where they were standing—a mere ten feet from one of the entrances to the bridge. Halsey closed her eyes for a moment then opened them again and, letting go of the AI, walked towards the doors that opened up as she approached. Her demeanor was once more that of a confident leader even before she crossed the threshold. Cortana was impressed beyond words. The Elite crew always saluted Halsey whenever she entered the room, always treated her like one of their own. Whatever she'd done to earn their trust, she was just grateful that she'd found a place to belong—even if it was for a short time.

Following Halsey inside, she noticed that some of the Elites were whispering among themselves and staring at the four holo-displays at the forward end of the room. Her eyes followed those of the Sangheili and instantly understood what all the fuss was about. "Whoa. You've been busy."

Halsey—who had made a beeline for the Sangheili shipmaster and hadn't even noticed the images above—turned around. "Come again?"

"That wasn't there when I left," the AI remarked, pointing at the enhanced image in the holo-displays.

Halsey raised an eyebrow and diverted her gaze towards the images of the Ark. It took her a moment to realize what was different, other than the absence of the Halo ring—and from the looks of it, she was as surprised to see it as Cortana. The doctor walked up the ramp of the center platform and pressed one of the holographic controls. "Atlantis, this is Halsey. Come in."

Colonel Carter's face popped up in the holo-screen to the right. "Welcome back, Doctor, Cortana. How did that test-fire go?"

"You'll be pleased to know that the Hive was completely obliterated,

along with its crew," Halsey announced rather dispassionately, despite her choice of words.

"_Great. Now all we have to do is to deliver the __pulse wave__ to Pegasus and my__ galaxy__."_

"In that regard, I couldn't help but notice the segmented ring hovering above the Ark. I assume it has something to do with your plan?"

Carter smirked._"Does it remind you of something other than a Halo?"_

Both Halsey and Cortana raised an eyebrow. They studied the image of the numerous objects that made up this new ring. Other than the Halos, the only other similarly shaped device they knew of was

"You don't say," Cortana thought out loud as she realized it.

Carter's grin grew wider with pride. _"Like I said before, all we needed for Mitchell's __idea__ to work was another Stargate networkâ€"or rather, a _Supergate_ network. You actually got here in time__._ I was about to try and make a connection between this Gate and the one in my Milky Way.__ Make sure to stay clear of it.__"_

Without any more explanations, the Colonel bent over a laptop to her left. Cortana looked at Halsey who just nodded reassuringly; they were at a safe distance from the so-called Supergateâ€| hopefully. Still, she left out the explanation of what 'Mitchell's idea' was. Figuring she'd find out soon enough, the AI didn't press the matter.

Somewhere hidden within her nanites' data banks, there was a basic concept of what a Stargate was and how it worked, so Cortana knew exactly what happened when a stable connection between Gates was made. However, she had nothing on the Ancient transportation device's larger counterpart. She could only imagine what to expect when Carter finished her last keystrokes and an energy burst started to flow from one of the 90 segments to the next then to another one and so on, drawing a perfect blue circle as it 'connected the dots'.

The massive splash-like effect was something unexpected. Many a Sangheili in the bridge flinched at the sight of it, despite being safe within the cruiser's hull. Cortana could only let out a 'breath' of amazement as the vortex settled into a hugeâ€| puddle, for lack of a better wordâ€"though actually, Cortana did understand that what looked like a puddle was the event horizon of the wormhole that connected this device to a similar one in Colonel Carter's home galaxy. "So that's how a Stargate works," she remarked almost imperceptibly.

"_Yep. The credit for this larger, intergalactic version goes to the Ori, though. That's how they managed to __deploy__ their fleets from their galaxy to ours. After their defeat, the Supergate in our galaxy was left unusedâ€"till now."_

"This Supergate is designed to work only between galaxies rather than

specific planets, then."

"_That's right. _Infinity_'s taking another disassembled Supergate to Pegasus as we speak, and I've already sent a third one through the Portal along with Installation 04. That Supergate and the one here will be powered by each Installation, respectively."_

"Okay, I think I know where this is going," Halsey broke into the conversation.

"_The plan now is to connect Installation 04's Supergate to the Supergates in Pegasus and my Milky Way as we fire the Array. That way, the pulse wave will reach both galaxies. By then, we will have both Stargate networks' Gates activated all at the same time, so that the pulse reaches every last planet there."_

"And the Precursor fleets will be no more," Halsey concluded.
"Brilliant."

Colonel Carter's grin became a funny face at this point as the left corner of her lips twitched slightly. "_There's only one small complication. Dialing multiple Gates requires some reprogramming of a Gate's normal dialing parameters. I already know how to do it with a standard Gate network, but I require some help with the Supergate's dialing program."_

"I suppose you require my assistance to do it," Cortana said.

"_It would speed up the process, yes."_

The AI nodded as she turned around and sprinted down the ramp to the only empty station in the bridge—the one she'd created for herself, following the common pattern used in UNSC ships. "Send us what you need me to modify," she called out as she moved away from the platform. "I'll get it done as fast as I can."

"_Thanks"_ , Colonel Carter replied, bending over her computer again. "_In the meantime, I'll make sure that our brand-new Supergate network is in place and ready."_

"Understood," Cortana said. She reached her console and placed her hand on what would appear to anyone else as a handprint scanner but which was actually her 'interface' with the ship's systems. Carter had already sent the data package. "I can confirm receipt of the dialing program," she added as she downloaded it into her own data banks. Without delay, her nanite brain started to analyze the new information—which comprised more than just a dialing program, in fact, since it also included everything there was to know on Supergates. She determined that it would take her about an hour to complete the rewriting process. Piece of cake. "I'll send it back to you once I'm done. Cortana out."

From that moment forward, she devoted all of her resources into the task at hand, not even paying attention to whatever else Halsey and Carter continued rambling about for several more minutes. She'd just been given the key to defeating the Precursors in three galaxies, and after her experience with the Gravemind, she was more determined than ever to ensure it happened.

Never again would the Flood or the Precursors threaten everything she

held dear.

* * *

><p>UNSC _**Infinity**_
>23**40**** hrs. December 11, 2558 (Military
Calendar)**

Daniel always knew when he'd crossed the event horizon of a Stargate. Despite the body growing accustomed to the freezing sensation and the increased momentum upon exiting after the first couple of times, the sensation never vanished completely. Still, that a device could transport an entire ship and its crew from one galaxy to the other without misplacing a single atom upon reconstitution would never cease to amaze him, even if that odd feeling didn't go away.

"That was different," Captain Lasky said beside him. Daniel had to refrain himself from chuckling. The manâ€"and virtually everyone else in the bridge aside from Daniel and, well, Rolandâ€"was shivering and rubbing his arms, and his face and hands were covered in small traces of frost. That was to be expected, given that this was his first Stargate experience, or rather, Supergate experience.

"For me, not so much," Daniel shrugged it off, trying to make it sound like one got used to it with time, which was, in fact, true.

"I bet," Lasky said, smirking. He approached the holo-table where Roland was awaiting with a post-travel report, and once it was 100% confirmed that everything and everyone was where it should be, he pressed the COM. "Atlantis, this is _Infinity_ actual. Come in."

One of the nearby screens came alive with Woolsey's face. "_Infinity_, this is Atlantis. How was your first Gate travel?"_

"It wasâ€| kinda odd, actually," Lasky admitted, still rubbing his arms.

"_The first time sure is. Colonel Carter just finished uploading a multi-dialing program to the Pegasus Gate. She's about to try and make a 'conference call' with all of the Supergates, so I suggest you steer clear."_

"Understood," Lasky replied, gesturing at his NAV officer to do as Woolsey said. "Looking forward to the demonstration."

Daniel scoffed. From this side, no one would be able to tell whether the 'conference call' actually succeeded, so it wouldn't be more of a demonstration than what the crew had already seen a few minutes ago when the Pegasus Supergate achieved a stable connection to the Ark's Gate. What would really give away whether it had worked would be if _Hammond_ at Installation 04, _Daedalus_ back in Pegasus, and _Odyssey_ from the Milky Way, all replied to Sam's hail.

As _Infinity_ came about to face the Supergateâ€"from a safe distance, of courseâ€"the massive intergalactic device finished dialing. Daniel was tempted to raise a fist of victory as an unstable vortex emerged from the Gate's center. But just as he heard Sam making her hail in the background, Roland's avatar started to flash

intermittently. "Captain? Our long-range sensors are acting a bit weird."

"Weird?" Lasky repeated.

Roland's frown deepened for a moment then faded. "It's probably just a temporary malfunction from our passage through the Supergate. I'll have them fixed in a moment," he dismissed his previous comment.

Distracted by this short exchange, Daniel missed the moment when Sam received confirmation from all three 304s. By the time he turned to look at the screen again, most of the people at Stargate Operations were beaming with excitement and anticipation. With all of the Rings and Supergates in place and the last stage of the plan ready to be executed, all that remained was to—

"Okay, this is no malfunction. The sensors are actually going haywire—" Roland said, his voice trailing off as his eyes scanned the inner workings of the ship. "This can't be right," he mumbled then turned towards the screen. "Atlantis, you picking up what we're reading?"

"_Your sensors, too?"_ McKay called out from the background.

That seemed to be enough to confirm Roland's suspicions, whatever those were. "Oh, no."

"What?" Lasky asked exasperatedly.

The ship's AI opened his mouth to speak, but the answer Lasky expected came from another source. Namely from the COM station, when the officer in charge called out: "Sir, we're receiving a transmission, unknown source, audio only."

Lasky frowned at this statement, but he didn't get to decide what to do or what instructions to give next. The transmission somehow found its way to every speaker in the ship before that. The hallways suddenly echoed with a booming voice that said as clearly as day: "_Children of our enemy, you shall fight your destiny no more. You will embrace your fate with open arms and become one with us— or embrace the fire of our wrath!"_

The voice alone was eerie enough to send shivers down everyone's spines, and the message it carried was even worse. But if it weren't enough to instill fear in the hearts of everyone in the bridge, what happened next probably scared stiff every living soul aboard the ship. For the moment the message finished, a bright, blinding light that emanated from hundreds upon thousands of hyperspace windows opening at the same time in the distance filled the bridge and every other section of the ship with a view of the exterior. These windows soon spewed a massive armada of Precursor Hive ships, more than anyone could count. They blocked the view of the UNSC Milky Way, forming a purple wall easily as large as the Ark itself.

Every hyperspace window closed almost as fast as they had opened, but aside from the initial momentum that carried them from subspace to normal space-time, the Hive ships that exited them didn't advance an inch. They just stood there, the mightiest fleet ever assembled since the first firing of the Halo rings. It was a dominance display, that

much was evidentâ€"and it was working, too. Daniel was frozen in place, utterly afraid, and out of the corner of his eye he could see that everyone else was in the same situation, including the Captain and the AI.

Without delay, the purple wall began glowing blue and red all over. Roland seemed to have trouble willing himself to analyze the readouts of the ship's sensors alerting them of the imminent danger. "Theâ€| Hive shipsâ€| are powering up weapons," he said in a shaky voice, turning to look at Lasky directly in the eye, visibly shocked. "All of them."

Not even this announcement was enough to bring everyone else back to reality; such was the shock that the Precursors had caused in _Infinity_'s crew. It wasn't until the enemy ship's weapons, both of Wraith and Covenant design, fired upon the helpless human ships and the Ark, that the shock became panic. Every officer in the bridge began screaming and crying, some of them only keeping their cool enough to call out to their Captain for instructions.

Lasky, however, wouldn't budge, wouldn't speak, wouldn't as much as blink. Out of every other person in the room, he showed the oddest expression. Afraid to death and uncertain, yes, but also incredibly calm, almost like he'd known somehow this would happen. It was the face of a man who wanted to fight but who knew that, whatever he did, would be just like throwing punches in the air. It was a countenance of resignation.

Daniel could understand that. He remembered when Oma told him of an impending danger far worse than anything else they'd faced so far. She'd been right. The Goa'uld, the Replicators, the Wraith, they all paled in comparison to this. Nothing, not even the Ark's feeble defense systems, would be able to make a dent on this fleet. The only thing these ships would be vulnerable to was the repurposed Halo Array. And while the humans had an advantage the Precursors still knew nothing about in the Supergate network, Sam had yet to activate the Ringsâ€"and that would take some time.

Time they no longer had.

Even if she managed to send out the command to fire, the Ark, and everything in its orbit, would likely be destroyed before the Rings even finished powering up. And if the Supergate here was destroyed while connected to the others, there was an equally likely chance that those Gates would also be obliterated or at least transmit the Ark's explosion through the open wormhole. Sam surely knew that, which meant she would instruct Jack aboard _Hammond_ to dial the Gates and then disengage the wormhole here, so that, if this Supergate indeed was vaporized, the rest would still be able to carry the Halos' pulse wave over to Pegasus and the SG Milky Way.

But without a way to transmit the wave _here_, the fleet that was attacking them would still survive and start all over againâ€| and eventually, they would be the victors in this short war.

Only no one here would be alive to see it.

* * *

><p>AN: So, yeah, like I said, it took me almost two years to

fonally come back and continue what I startedâ€"and trust me, I'm here to finish it. I guess I just had to find a little extra inspiration... which came with _Halo 5: Guardians_.**

The thing is, I always intended to write a sequel to this story that would also fit in with the next game in the saga to some extent. Back in 2014, however, all we had was bits and pieces that didn't really help to speculate much about what would the story actually be. And while I originally intended to finish this story that same year, no matter what came next, I'm now glad that I had to wait this long to know what came after _Halo 4_. Trust me, you will be too... but that's a story for another day. You'll find out what I mean when I upload the final chapter of TFRR.

Now, I do need to give you a heads-up. I'm still writing another story (the first in a planned series of crossovers, in fact) and I'm trying to alternate writing chapters between it and this story, so it's possible you won't see another update until about a month or two from now. BUT, I am finishing what I started, or as one famous supersoldier would say, I'm "finishing this fight". For real.

Until then, thank you all for your immense patience. I hope this chapter was worth it, even if it wasn't as fast-paced as the previous one. And thanks also to the people that have been finding this story and adding it to their favorites/alerts/bookmarks over the last couple of years. It means a lot to me.

I'll see you when I see you!

End
file.